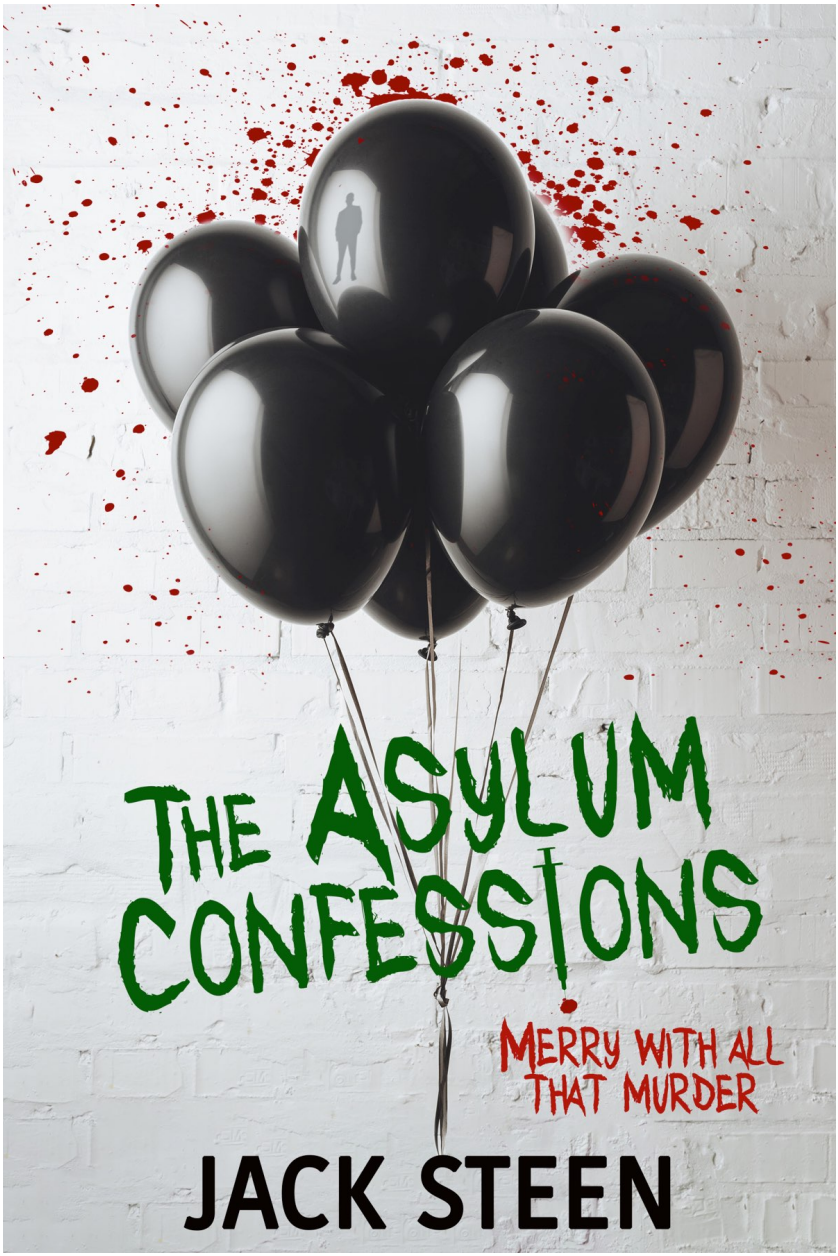
THE ASYLUM CONFESSIONS
MERRY WITH ALL THAT MURDER
JACK STEEN

THE ASYLUM CONFESSIONS

Merry with all that Murder

The Asylum Confession Files
Book 6

JACK STEEN

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NOTE TO READERS

Hey Confession Addicts - happy holidays and all that jazz.

So, with this being Book Six, most of you know this by now, but let me put it out there again: I am not a writer. I try to make sure there are no spelling errors, and I do work with an editor, but if you're looking for a book written by the next Stephen King, this ain't it.

Although, if you're Stephen King, or know him and want to recommend these books to him…go for it! I don't think anyone has recommended them…yet…but hey, wouldn't it be cool if you were the reason he picked up the first book? (And if you do and he mentions me on Twitter…dude, wouldn't that be amazing?)

I'm still raising a toast to you all down at the pub!

Appreciate the support. Appreciate the beers. Appreciate that you enjoy these confessions.

And hey - Olin Lester - I'll keep repeating this - thanks for your support! And for those who have picked up this book - go check out Olin Lester's books, you'll probably enjoy them! (Also...we 'may' do a collaboration in the future, so I highly suggest you read his stuff).

To my fellow Asylum addicts on Patreon, long time readers, and to my new friends…salut!

THANK YOU

Special thank you's to the following "Long Term Patients, Ward Members and Asylum Addicts" from my Patreon page. This book would not be possible without your continued support each month!

Patients:

Allison Weghorst, Beth Carpenter-Bell, Irene Roberts, Jacqueline Martinez, Jacqueline Mocnik-Boyd,
Lauren DeVault, Lindsay Ugashick, Marianne Beveridge, Tabitha Johnson, Tammy Parker

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and Tiffani Wilson

Aslyum Addicts:
Ambone, Amy Keifer, Becca Fulmer, Jen Brooks, Michelle Baker,
Natasha Harder, Tiffany Nessler, and Vicky Whiteside,

These confessions are dedicated to you!

YOUR SUPPORT

I'm just going to throw this out there: there will be another book. Of course, there will be another book…how could there not be. It'll be out by end of summer…or sooner. It's up for preorder right now with a date for the end of next year, but that's mainly because this looks to be a crazy year for me, and I don't know how I'll do with a tight deadline. The book will be out mid-year, I promise.

Hey, who knows, I might even have more than just that one out - I'll keep you in suspense until then.

With that in mind, if you want to continue to find out more about the confessions, behind the scenes, read more confession files before anyone else, even have a confession patient named after you (remember - I don't give real names, etc)….then join me over on Patreon.

So, let's talk about Patreon. What is it, and why should I join it?

Well…it gives you all the behind-the-scenes, new book info, and each month I'll share new confessions with you and so much more. Not convinced yet? How about this…I'll be sharing all upcoming confessions over on the Patreon page before I put them together into a book.

So basically - you can read them all before anyone else.

It's also a better way to stay in touch rather than a mailing list that you may or may not see in your inbox.

www.patreon.com/jacksteen

Click to check it out…no pressure, but if you do sign up, be sure to say hello in one of the posts, and I'll raise a toast to you at the pub.

WHO AM I?

Hey - even if you've read my other books, don't skip this section…there's a part about my mom in here, so you'd better read it!

My name is Jack Steen.

By now, if you've read a few of the other confessions, you recognize my name and you know what I'm about to say. I need to say it anyway, so bear with me.

Just a reminder: I'm a nobody. I'm serious about that.

I'm not a writer, but I am a storyteller (since so many of you tell me this is true, I might as well add it here).

I'm a night nurse in the Asylum, and I listen to the deathbed confessions of the criminally insane.

For these patients of mine, I'm their companion into the afterlife, their death angel, if you will. I give them the one thing they've been craving for since coming to the Asylum: an audience.

By now, you should know the routine…don't ask which Asylum, because I will never tell. Besides, it really doesn't matter which one - they're all the same. Don't ask me about the patients either - I change their names, victims names, settings etc…I'm serious about not wanting to get sued.

So, what is it I do that's so special? Well, let me tell you: I take their deathbed confessions. The ones no one else has heard—the ones everyone wants to hear.

My patients tell me their stories, and they confess their messed up lives because I do what no one else in this fucking asylum does.

I listen.

I've worked here the longest out of anyone on my floor. I've got the scars, the stitches, the broken bones to prove it. I worked my way from the shittiest jobs here to the one I have now.

I used to think being a nurse was my calling. My passion.

I thought I could make a difference, that what I did was meaningful.

I was stupid to think anything in life was worth this shit.

I used to work in a hospital full of people who had lives and loved ones that cared about them. Most of my patients here have been discarded, forgotten about, left to spend their final days alone.

Here's a reminder: I won't tell you which hospital I work at.

I won't tell you the names of those dying.

But I won't lie to you.

You'll read exactly what I'm told.

The confessions you'll read here are all going to focus on one central theme.

This book - it's about the holidays. You probably guessed this by now, but this time of the year isn't one of my favorites. My mom, she loves it. So much so that she begged me to add some of her cookie recipes to this book…so for those who like that kind of thing, they're in there, and Mom says "enjoy".

I'm often asked if these confessions are true. Do you think I really know? Don't act all surprised either - I mean - look at who is telling the confession! Some of my patients are pure psychopaths, narcissistic, and like the sound of their voice. They'll tell whatever tale they believe will get them the most notice. But, like every tale ever told, there's always a nugget of truth.

These sadistic bastards could be playing their final game with me by messing with my head, and now, they could be playing with yours.

THE THEME FOR THESE CONFESSIONS...

"Deck the halls with guns and thistles..."

It's a stupid song Ike made up one year, one that gets stuck in your head whether you want it to or not.

Here's how it goes...

Deck the halls with guns and thistles,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Spike the punch with poison liquids,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Don the ski masks and the black gloves,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Slit the throats of all the sleepers
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la.

Every year we add a new verse and every year, Ike tries to outdo himself. Sometimes, depending on who's on the floor, he'll try to personalize it for that patient.

A little morbid, yes. Did you really expect anything different when it comes to Ike?

Me, I like Halloween.

Ike, he's a full on Christmas dude and for the life of me, I can't figure out why. I used to think it was due to his wife's influence, but apparently the guy has the holiday fever worse than her - when they moved in together he had at least three boxes of the holiday crap to decorate his house.

Color me surprised. You too, I bet.

Bet you're wondering if we decorate the floor or not, right?

We sure as hell do. Well, I don't, but Ike and the others - yes, they do. In fact, they will even wear fucking elf costumes when they do it.

Yes, it's a thing. Ridiculous, I know.

Maybe one year I'll share a sketch of Ike in his costume. He'll kill me for sharing it but hey, there are worse ways to die, right?

The floors are all a little different when it comes to how they decorate.

For instance, the nursery goes all out with lights and making their own paper decorations and snowflake cutouts.

On my floor, we're a little more adult with our decorations. Since anyone who comes up here are handcuffed or shackled to their beds, we're not too worried about them taking a glass ornament and using it as a weapon. I mean...most wouldn't even be able to hobble across the floors even if they weren't chained to their beds.

We've got a few different themed Christmas trees. I even have a small one in my office where I hang all my skulls, murderous pumpkins and skeletons.

What? Did you expect anything else from me?

The day shift ladies like to string lights up everywhere. My personal preference would be to get rid of them all...it only highlights just how disgusting this floor when it comes to the grime and embedded dirt.

The following confessions all have a central theme - which I'm sure is obvious. They're focused on the holly jolly and all that Christmasy fun memory shit.

Oh, and my mom has added some recipes to each confession. Considering some of you like that and they kind of fit the patient's tastes (you'll understand later as you read).

Enjoy.

Jack

PATIENT CLYDE

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Thank you to MaryAnn Baum for helping to name Clyde and Penny.

CHAPTER ONE

JACK

Christmas. Ho-ho-ho and all that merry shit people like to say. We all know by now how I feel about the holiday, so Ike says I need to skip all that shit and just get with the program.

The program - as he likes to say - is about figuring out ways to not be a scrooge.

At least he doesn't tell me I have to enjoy it.

Between you and me…I don't mind Christmas, I just hate how commercialized it is, how it's so narrow-focused, and the expectation everyone feels because some stupid corporate heads want to be rich.

Holidays aren't easy for everyone. I know you know that.

I wish everyone realized this simple fact, that they'd stop being so focused on the holly jolly, merry gifts, and rum punch.

Sure, maybe for those who are at home with family, holidays are a give-and-take kind of deal. You have the happy with the crazy, the fun that outweighs the stress, but for those in the Asylum, Christmas fucking sucks.

Not for everyone. Some people seem to find ways to enjoy the holiday - even if it's just the cookies they get for dessert or the ornaments and lights that get strung up by the staff.

We try to make it a happy thing on this floor - I really don't have much of a choice. The day shift does most of the decorating - they even invite the off-shift employees to join them, and they host

a cookie decorating challenge after the place looks all festive.

I don't join in. You really didn't expect me to, right?

So, all this brings me to the first patient I want to introduce you to.

Ike sent me an email before shift with some lyrics and told me to guess who had arrived:

Deck the halls with knives and muscles,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Spread your arms for a good bear tussle,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Pull them close, shiv them tight…
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Kill your enemies and say good night,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la.

I knew right away who was on the floor.

Clyde.

Clyde is a little rough around the edges - and that's being nice.

He's one hell of a beast - or he used to be. He's slender but had muscles you weren't even aware of, once upon a time.

Clyde is hard. He's gruff and ugly-tempered. He'd sooner break your bones than give you a smile.

I once watched him bring someone in for a hug and almost broke the girl's back from his grip.

Clyde is an ugly *sonofabitch,* and he's quite proud of it.

His story has to come first, whether it's what I want or not. By the time you're done with this book, you'll understand why.

CHAPTER TWO

Ike's all decked in green, complete with a stupid pointy hat that jingles with every fucking step he takes.

He's got this huge ass-shittin' grin on his face, and I should be on guard, but I assume he's added a little extra Baileys to his coffee today or something.

"When did you get in?" I check the clock, and while I'm early, it's obvious he's been here for a while already.

The floor looks like a fucking horror show if you were anything but an elf.

"About an hour ago. Did you notice the windows?" He nods in the direction of the window just off to the side of the nurses' station.

Did I notice the windows? No, why would I? It's in the middle of fucking winter, and they're all probably frozen over, but I do the polite thing, and I step out into the hallway and take a look.

"Why the fuck would you paint snowflakes on a window that's covered in ice?"

"Stop being a fucking scrooge. I put something on your desk, and I expect you to wear it."

Wear it? Oh fuck, he did not.

"A deal is a deal," he says, his shit-ass grin growing wider.

"I didn't think you were serious." My groan is genuine.

During our downtime, we met at the pub and played a few games of darts. The loser had to wear a fucking Santa hat for the next shift. Considering he was close to being drunk and I only had

two beers, I thought for sure I'd win.

I was wrong.

"Besides, it's perfect timing," Ike says.

I walk into my office and see the hat in the middle of my desk.

"Why's that?" I look at the files in my inbox, and one name grabs my attention.

“Figured.”

“Wasn’t sure if you saw my email in time. The lyrics gave it away, didn’t they?” Ike hands me the file I'm eyeing, and you can bet your ass I'm drooling.

Oh, I had an idea, for sure, but I’m the type of guy who needs to see it to believe it, and when it comes to this floor - nothing is dependable.

There are a few inmates in this building that I've been keeping my eye on, patients that I want to meet as they come on this floor.

This one, in particular, is one I've been waiting for.

“I poked my head in, and Clyde told me to fuck right off.”

Guess I’ll be having a chat with Clyde tonight. Wonder if there will be anyone else?

"Has he been here long?" This is my first night back on rotation.

Ike says nothing, which is fine since I'm flipping through the notes in the file.

We’ve got four patients tonight. The only one in a talkative mood is Clyde. He's complained of pain and requested heated blankets.

I can be accommodating.

"Heat some blankets, will you? I want to go welcome our new guests to the floor." I open my desk drawer and pull out a notebook.

"How's everyone else? Pretty quiet?"

Ike shrugs. "Nothing I can't handle. We’ll be ready for the others, don’t worry.”

Who the hell said I was worried?

“Now put that hat on and go see Clyde.”

I snatch that hat off my desk and put it on my head, scowling

enough to have Ike snicker behind me as I leave, pulling my chair with me.

Fucking Ike. Fucking darts. Fucking dares.

CHAPTER THREE

Before I left my office, I put on some music.

Now, let's get one thing straight. You will never find me offering to put on the holly jolly fucking Christmas music that is non-stop on the radio.

Fuck that shit.

I've got a playlist that I've been creating over the years of basic anti-Christmas Christmas songs. Not all the songs are against Christmas; some are just sad. But I like to play it when I'm on shift.

I'll have it in the background, over the speakers. We don't always play music at night, mainly because I'd like a quiet shift, and the music will wake patients up, but if there are only a few, or even none, on the floor, you bet your ass I'll play it.

Tonight is the perfect night to put this shit on and have it fill the hallways.

I try to ignore all the twinkling lights and wall stickers, but I feel like I'm in an elementary school.

Do you remember your time in school as a kid during the holidays? How the walls were decorated with handmade crafts and coloring pages with scribbly crayon marks?

We don't have the thick crayon pictures, but we have the crafty shit. Some of the ladies like to bring things in every year - they say it's from their kids or something they did on the weekend, but seriously - some of that shit should be designated for one place and one place only … their own homes.

We've got this big crafty banner full of stockings and candy

canes down the hall where Clyde is. Like, what the fuck, people? What the actual fuck? We're supposed to be adults…

"Like it?" Ike calls out to me as I'm taking it all in.

My head swivels toward him. "You don't want me to answer that. You know you don't."

"I brought that in. Found it at the store in the city. It's a bit rustic, and I thought you'd appreciate it."

Can he see the disgust on my face? The absolute horror? Probably not.

"Come on, if it had skeletons, you'd have hung it yourself."

I want to deny it, but I can't. He's right.

Fuck it.

He loves to decorate for this holiday the same way I like to decorate for Halloween, and I hate him right now for pointing that out.

"You're an ass." My words are obviously loud enough for him to hear because he crackles with laughter.

Fucking asshole.

"I hate it too." Clyde's rough voice catches my attention. "Light a match, Jack. You know that's what this place deserves."

"You going down with the ship, Clyde? Cause I sure as hell ain't." I project my voice till it's almost bouncing off the walls.

"You mean shit, don't you? Go down with the shit - 'cause that's what this place is. A hell hole. Who would miss it if it disappeared?" He coughs, and it doesn't sound good.

I look back toward Ike. He lifts his hand in that *yeah-I-know* gesture.

Clyde won't be with us long.

"You ready for a chat, Clyde?" I pull my chair behind me, the squeaky wheel sending shivers of pleasure up my spine.

"Here he comes," Clyde says. "Ready to kill me, Jack? Is that it?"

I don't say anything.

"Fucking bring it. It's story time, bitches."

By the time I make it to Clyde's room, he's got a shit-ass grin that reaches from ear to ear, and I have to look away, just for a moment.

It's hard looking at Clyde. Hard facing him when he's like this.

I can't describe him to you because nothing I say will do him justice.

"Cute hat. Isn't Halloween over? You sure as hell ain't no Santa Claus."

Fucking asshole. I hate this hat.

"You'll change your toon once my present arrives."

"Is that so?" He stares at the door and stays quiet while I review his chart. The guy won't last long, and I almost feel for him.

It takes a few minutes, but the tell-tale squeak of Ike's shoes on the linoleum floor catches Clyde's attention.

"Is Ike coming too? The asshole was here earlier, asking how I was doing. Who the fuck does that, Jack? How do you think I'm doing? I'm in a fucking asylum and dying on a fucking floor where I'm all alone. Like that's how I fucking want to go."

I roll my eyes, probably a little too much, because Clyde spits. Not on me, thank god.

"Really, dude? Is that necessary?"

"Fuck you."

Ike is there, at the door, a blanket in his hand.

I take it from him and place it over Clyde's legs. He lets out a soft groan of appreciation.

Ike tosses him a salute, then leaves, and I plump my ass down in my chair, rolling my neck, letting my head rest backward on my spine for a few seconds, enjoying the pull of muscles as I do so.

"All right, Clyde, we need a few ground rules here. You're not going to last long. I think we all recognize that. I can walk away and let you lie here alone, or we can be civil, and you can die with someone at your side. The choice is yours."

I can tell he wants to say something. He mulls it over, his eyes moving around the room, never quite landing on me as he makes

his decision.

"I won't be the only one tonight."

I nod. "I know. I'm prepared for the others to arrive."

"You'll stay with them too?"

I nod again. If one of my patients wants my company while I'm on shift, I'll be there. I always have been. I always will be.

"Fine then," he says. "Let's get started."

CHAPTER FOUR

CLYDE TO JACK

Family. Family isn't always fucking blood, you know that right?

Family is more than just words, more than just genes.

Family is a choice. A decision. I chose my fucking family, Jack, and I chose my place in my family.

I was the protector.

From day one that's been my role.

Even here, in this place of hell, it's who I am.

If I don't protect them, who will?

It's fucking exhausting too. To always be someone everyone expects you to be. When I have downtime, when I'm all alone and don't need to be watching…it's a slice of heaven.

You probably didn't expect me to say something like that, did you?

I'm a brute. Sure.

I'm an asshole. Yes.

I live with a single focus. Obviously.

But I'm more than just who everyone expects me to be.

To be fair, that's only a sliver of who I am, so it doesn't really count.

It's like a priest. Once they say their vows, once they put on that collar, that's who they are. That's their very essence now, what's expected of them

But it's not their fucking everything, right? They can have their own little vices, they're allowed that.

Some like to fuck little kids. Others like to gamble. Some like to

watch their soap operas in the middle of the day and then porn at night.

Being a priest isn't their everything.

You get what I'm saying?

What the fuck am I getting at?

Who the hell knows, man. Maybe, that I'm not just about protecting my family. I like to read books too, you know?

What do I like to read? Nah, man, I tell you, and you'll laugh your ass off.

Sure, go ahead and guess if you want.

No, I don't fucking read romance. Who the fuck does that?

Science fiction? No. Come one, get real.

Give me a good cowboy book. I good western and I'm happy.

I think in my other lives, I spent my days on the back of a horse, riding the range, protecting my land.

You? What do you like to read?

Oh, now it's your turn to tell me to fuck off, is it? Whatever man. If you don't read, you're a wuss, plain and simple, and to be honest, I thought you were better than that.

So yeah, in my downtime, I read westerns. Sometimes it takes me a lifetime to read a book, other times I plow through them, one after the other, with no interruptions.

Here in this place…I always made sure to get time each day to read. You have to, you get that right?

Otherwise, you're face to face with insanity, and that shit can eat you up sideways.

CHAPTER FIVE

CLYDE

I was a grown man when I was introduced to the people I would soon consider my family.

Right away, there was a connection, and I knew I would do anything to protect them.

Anything.

I don't remember much of my life before I met them. I guess you could say I was a nobody until they made me a somebody.

Sounds corny, but it's the fucking truth.

The person I was before - didn't exist. Not in my mind, anyway.

Guess you could say I had a sort of 'rebirth' when my family found me.

Yes, they found me.

I'm serious about not remembering much of my life before them. I have glimpses into who I was, these memories of what my life was like as a child, but they feel foreign - almost like I'm watching a movie or filling in details from what someone else has told me.

You can let that shit eat you alive, or you can accept that it's just the way things are.

I accepted it.

Penny was the first to find me.

Her image is seared into my brain.

She was this kid. A teenager. Mouthy. Bratty. She needed a good ass-kicking if you ask me.

She's got quite the attitude, that's for sure.

She liked to dye her hair. She was forever changing it from black to purple or blue or white. One time, she had this rainbow look, which was pretty cool.

But that day, her hair was this brilliant purple that sparkled in the sun. She wore all black, from her boots to her ripped jeans and tank top. She had a sweater tied around her waist, and that was even black.

Most people, when they saw her, they'd give her a side glance, judge her immediately and steer clear.

Not me.

I saw her and knew right away I always wanted to be around her.

She had this presence about her. For a damn kid, she was something.

She was in the park, lying on her stomach, feet kicking in the air as she read a book. The sun made her hair shimmer, and when I blocked her shade, the look on her face had those stupid lightning bugs go crazy in my stomach.

"Got a problem, jerk?"

Four words. Made quite the impression. She wasn't shy. Didn't care who I was or what I wanted. Made it very clear I was a nuisance.

She reminded me of me. Or the me that I thought I was.

"What are you reading?"

"What's it to you?"

I plopped down on the grass and shrugged.

Now, most girls her age would generally freak out if a guy had done this - especially one a little older than them. Not Penny.

"I like to read. You don't see people reading much anymore." I reached for her book and flipped the cover over.

Little House on the Prairie.

Can you fucking believe it?

She pulled herself into a sitting position, placed the book in her

lap, and tilted her head while giving me a look that made me uncomfortable.

"What are you reading?"

She points toward the noticeable book bulge in my jacket pocket. I pull it out. Just one of those dime novels I found in a box at a garage sale.

"Western, huh? That's like…close to the same time period, I guess."

She opened her book again, head bowed, and read her book as if I didn't even exist anymore.

So I did the same.

We sat there for about an hour or so, silently turning page after page, ignoring everything and anyone around us.

It wasn't until the light started to fade, just a little, that she jumped up.

"Time for supper." She started to walk away before she stopped and turned to look back at me. "Are you coming, or what?"

From the moment she jumped up to the moment she stopped, my heart was full of a heaviness I'd never been able to explain properly. I knew I'd found my person - not in a sexual way, get that out of your fucking head - but in a family way. Make sense? I had someone to call my own, someone to be part of my family, for once, and then they were leaving before I could tell them what they meant to me.

I was sad.

So when she asked if I was coming or not, you better believe I got to my feet and followed her.

We didn't really talk much. Not verbally. Everything I needed or wanted to say wasn't necessary. I'd have a thought formed on my tongue, gather the courage to say it, and she'd look up at me, and I knew she knew. She knew what I was going to say. She knew how I felt. She knew, and that was enough.

That was fucking enough.

Yeah, I know how weird this sounds. I get that. Don't care,

though. Don't care what you or anyone else has to think about this.

I now had a family. I went from a person of one to a company of two.

When we arrived at her house, she pulled me in by the hand. Told me to take my shoes off. Said that I could be myself, could relax here, and that I don't ever have to worry about being alone.

Then, as we walked into her house, you know the words she said?

"Guess who I found, guys? Clyde. He finally showed up, and now he's here. He's hungry too."

I ate. I showered. I had my own bed to sleep in, in a room that was all mine, with a door to shut. Penny brought me a stack of books she had raided from her father's bookshelf, all westerns. Can you believe that? Told me to make myself at home, and you know what?

That's exactly what I did.

Penny welcomed me with open arms and never let go. I became a child that clung to my parent's legs whenever they were introduced to someone new. You know those kids. At first, I was shy, didn't say much, and preferred to stay in the background and watch and listen.

When you do that long enough, you start to notice things. Things that just don't sit right with you.

Like all families, Penny's was…complicated.

Her parents tended to ignore me. They didn't like her much and didn't appreciate her bratty teenager attitude, but I didn't mind it.

She got grounded. A lot. Not like it mattered. Her mother would send her to her room for back-talking her father, coming home late, or not coming home at all. She'd always be confined to either her room or the house, not being allowed to leave unless it was for school.

Penny didn't care. Her mother should have known that about her and should have figured out her daughter was competent, challenging, and downright cynical. You tell her to do one thing,

she'll do the opposite. She was stubborn too.

She'd get grounded, but the moment she was out of her parent's view, she'd be out of the house faster than a mouse snatching cheese from a trap.

Why they bothered, I have no idea.

Her mom was a pushover.

Her father…he was a different story.

I was told from day one to steer clear of him. He was aware of me, but from a distance, you know? Keep my mouth shut, and we were fine. Stand up to him, and he'd make Penny regret bringing me home like a stray dog.

I didn't care what they said about me, but threatening Penny… that did the trick.

I didn't like it, but I listened when she said to leave her Dad alone.

It's a good thing she said something too.

They lived in a nice size house. Penny didn't often go down into the basement - that was her father's space, I guess. He had his office down there, plus a gym set up. I liked to spend time down there. He had a good weight setup, one he was always adding to. I liked to think he did it for me. Sometimes, at night, I'd go down there and do sets. Sometimes I'd catch him watching.

I always fantasized about how I'd hurt him with his own shit. You know?

He'd taunt me late at night, watching from the doorway. He'd sneer and make fun of me, call me a weakling and stupid, and a hell of a lot more.

I made him a promise, there in that weight room, just him and I.

I promised him I'd kill him one day. Kill him for hurting my family. He laughed and said to bring it.

The fucking retard actually said that to me, can you believe it?

Every single day, I'd be down there, and my whole focus was to get big enough, strong enough, deadly enough that I would bring it, and he'd live to regret it.

I swore I'd fucking kill him.

Penny made me promise not to do it unless she gave me permission.

It was a promise I hated making, but I did it.

I'd do anything for her, and she knew it.

CHAPTER SIX

CLYDE TO JACK

Yeah, I know. All of that sounds weird, right?

Who in their right mind would take a stranger off the street, bring them home, and then keeps them like they were a new pet?

Who in their right mind would let themselves be treated like a pet?

Well, Penny did, and so did I. I didn't mind it. Stop fucking judging me.

Shit, Jack. I'm trying to be honest with you. You wanted civil, but if you keep looking at me like that, you'll get the crazy, I swear to God.

I'm trying to do my family justice while I still can, you know?

Penny was different. Is different. That kid…she doesn't know what it's like to be scared. She don't get it, Jack, not like you and I.

She expects the world to be a bad place and takes things as they came. She's not a crybaby, one of those girls who play victim all the time.

The shit done to Penny…it would destroy a normal kid.

Not her, though. Not my girl.

My girl took whatever was handed to her and made it work for her.

Since the moment I met her, I knew she was special.

She says the moment she saw me, she knew I was family.

How does that happen?

Shut the fuck up and pass me a fucking tissue, will you? I'm not the first man with a tear in his eye, and I bet your dirty ass you cry more than a fucking fountain.

Call me a fucking crybaby, and I'll bust your ass.

[Jack here: for the record, I didn't say a word to Clyde about the tears. Well, that's a lie. I just told him to fuck off, that there's no one here to impress.]

Penny's father was an asshole and her mother wasn't much better.

I used to think the perps that destroyed children were monsters and deserved the worst pain imaginable.

I don't think that now. Now, I think the people who turned a blind eye, the people who knew what was happening and did nothing…they are the monsters.

I don't fucking care if you're a victim.

I don't fucking care if you're being tortured or beaten or raped, too.

You fucking step up and do everything you can to protect your child.

Sure, you might not always do it, but at least you tried.

At least you fucking tried.

Her mom, she never tried. Not while I was there. Penny said she never tried before either.

Her mother was a ball of fury, angry, bitter, and a witch.

Personally, I think she liked the fact the dad turned his attention from the wife to the kid.

God, it makes me so fucking angry. I wanted to kill her, Jack. I swear to you I did.

I wanted to kill him and her for what they did to Penny.

But I loved Penny more than I hated them.

That says something, don't ya think?

People call me a monster. They don't know true monsters.

Not like I do.

Not like Penny did.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CLYDE

Within six months of meeting Penny, we ran away.

I was the one who convinced her to do it.

To me, it was kind of a given. I mean - I lived on my own for years, right? I knew how to survive.

Sure, having a bed to myself was nice. Food in the fridge - fuck yeah, that was a comfort I never knew before. Being able to shower and wash my clothes and not always have to be looking over my shoulder - hell, yeah, that was nice.

Nice - but not important. There's a difference, Jack.

You know what I'm talking about, I see it in your face.

It was more important for me, to keep Penny safe.

Safe from her father.

Safe from her mother.

I don't need to tell you what they did to her - I think you've got the gist by now, right? That's her story, not mine.

I promised her I wouldn't let anyone else ever touch her again, and bang for a dollar, I kept my word.

No one hurt Penny again, not while I was around.

She needed me for my protection, and that's what she got.

She packed up a bag of clothes and essentials - soap, socks, toothbrush and paste, deodorant, a blanket, a warm jacket…and a bunch of other stuff I didn't think we needed. Everything and anything could get stolen when you live on the streets.

We snuck out of the garage, and wouldn't you know it - on one of the shelves was a small two-person tent in a nice carry-case. For sure I snatched that up real quick.

Penny lived in the suburbs, so we jumped on a bus and made it downtown.

There are plenty of shelters, soup kitchens, and access to food and stuff in the core. You also have to be careful, though, plenty of people who will take advantage of you too.

We found a group beneath a bridge. There were a few tents set up, and a few fire pits.

Penny was worried it would be hard to be accepted, but I knew it wouldn't be.

When you join a group like that, there are a few things you need to be on the lookout for: figure out who is in charge - and you better believe it's not always you who assume to be. You also need to figure out the rules, and what's required to join - because there's always a price to pay, and you need to figure out real quick what you'll contribute to the group.

I didn't want Penny to come off as weak, but I wasn't going to look stupid either.

I let her do the talking, but I made sure people knew my presence was non-negotiable.

The fact she had her own tent, an assortment of knives (I made sure to take those), and brought an offering of food (which, again, I stole from the freezer in the garage), we were welcomed to stay.

I found us a nice spot, close to the edge if we needed to disappear, closer to the women than the men, and set up camp.

The minute Penny sat down on her sleeping bag and took it all in, I could see a change in her.

Sure, some would call us stupid. Others might say we were smart.

We did what we had to do, and she was finally safe.

Well…safer.

Come on, I'm not stupid. Awful things happen in camps like

that. But not on my watch.

You get that, right?

No one was going to put a fucking finger on Penny unless she said it was okay.

Life wasn't easy in that camp, of course. It was an adjustment for Penny, more than me.

She still went to school - I made sure of that. I rode the bus with her to the school, then met up with her on the bus afterward, too. I did this every fucking day, just to make sure she was safe.

No one knew she'd run from her. Her stupid parents never called it in, never told the school. Penny got real good at forging their signatures, and if money was ever needed, well, that girl of mine became a great pick-pocket.

You learn to survive the best way you can, and my girl, she did a fucking good job.

I wasn't stupid. I tore up camp every day. I saw some shit go down with others, how they lost things, and that wasn't going to happen to us.

We kept our possessions to a minimum. We didn't always return to that camp. Sometimes, we found a place in an abandoned backyard, in a park, or in someone's shed.

You'd be amazed at how many people don't lock up their sheds in their yards.

Here's the secret - you figure out which ones don't have dogs and which ones are rarely home. Those are the ones with the sheds you want to sleep in - cause they're full of either stupid expensive equipment to keep their lawn nice or they stuff it with so much stuff that you could move things around to make up a sleeping space, and no one would notice.

There were days after school we'd head to the library. Penny would do homework, find a corner to curl up in, read, nap, and stay warm until the place closed. They had a covered area out in the back, and once everyone was gone for the night, we'd camp out there sometimes,

Eventually, they caught on. The main librarian, she was a real softy. She hired me to be the night watchman and would often leave me leftovers to eat for dinner.

Yep, Penny and me, we did fine. I took good care of her, I did.

Did bad things ever happen to us? Shit, for sure.

We had dogs chase us. Penny would get hurt sneaking in or out of places. Someone called the cops on us once when we broke into someone's house.

Whoa, hold on a minute there, Jack. We weren't stealing anything. I scouted that place and realized they must be on vacation or something. I found a window that wasn't locked, and we slept on the couch - not in their beds. We used their washroom, ate a little bit of food, and even planned on leaving money to replace what we ate. We were being nice. We didn't put the lights on, didn't watch television, did nothing that would look suspicious from the outside.

So how'd we get caught? A stupid neighbor walking their dog saw the bathroom light go on.

I had to fucking shit - you can't do that in the dark. Well, you can, but you can't wipe properly, you know? And I wasn't going to sleep with a shitty ass, *thank-you-very-much*.

As soon as we heard someone banging on the door with the threat to call the cops, we bolted as fast as we could - yes, after I finished shitting on the toilet.

We were down a few blocks by the time we saw the flashing lights pass us.

Back to the library. Working the night shift, that was the luxury, let me tell you. By then, Penny was in her last year of high school, and we worked during the week. On the weekends, we'd camp out down by the bridge - we were regulars by that point and welcomed by the matriarch of the family.

Leona, well, she was something, let me just say that.

She took us in right from the beginning. I think our first night in the camp, I set up the tent next to hers. She looked out for us for sure. She made sure Penny stayed away from drugs - not that she

needed to - what do you think I was doing? Sitting on my fucking ass and letting her get high? Not on my watch. If anyone was going to smoke something - it was me, and it was just cigarettes I could bum or steal off someone.

Penny, she never touched that shit.

Leona was right happy when I got that job at the library. I'd sneak her books to read - we'd trade every weekend, she'd give me what she'd read, I'd give her some new books to enjoy. They were always signed out under my name, and I never lost a fucking book.

Yeah, I'm fucking proud of that.

Thanks to being at the library and not being in trouble, Penny was a straight-A student. You know, if she'd wanted to go to college, she could have gone anywhere, gotten in any place…she just couldn't afford it, and those fucking forms she had to fill out were garbage.

A street kid can't go to college. You know that. I know that. Once Penny realized that, it tore her up. She got so sad, so depressed, it was hard, you know?

She kept her spirits up, though. I made her finish out the year. She had no choice. My girl wasn't going to be a dropout.

We worked in that library for a long time.

That library, it changed our lives, you better believe it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CLYDE TO JACK

Teenagers are hard, man. I wouldn't ever choose to raise one again, you know?

They're moody sons-a-bitches for one. Catty as all get out. Nothing I did or said was right and for fucks sake, if I ever hear someone tell me 'I don't understand', I'll bash their skulls in ten seconds flat.

I loved that girl, love that girl still, but fuck me a new one, she was difficult to raise.

Stubborn girls turn into independent, resourceful, challenging women…if they live to see the day.

When people say that it takes a fucking village to raise a child, they ain't joking, that's for sure. How single parents do it when they have no help, I don't get it. I really don't. Those who manage it are fucking amazing, you get that, right?

Especially when it comes to raising fucking teenagers. Like holy hell, if you can survive that, you can survive almost anything.

Living in here, is a cakewalk compared to living on the streets with Penny, let me say that.

That girl, she had a mind of her own. She took no shit from anybody.

I like to credit myself for that. Once we got on the streets, once I got her from her fucking asshole of a father, she became a different person, you know? Free. In control.

We had growing pains but that comes with kids figuring out who they

are, right?

It wasn't lost on me that I couldn't do this alone. I couldn't protect her and raise her all by myself.

I mean…I could and did but it wasn't ideal.

What the fuck, you say?

Yes, I took on the role of a parent. Wouldn't you? Not being blood was irrelevant and you know it.

That girl, she needed a parent. She needed a fucking body to actually care about her and help protect her, not just physically but emotionally too.

Do you think I could have done that?

No shit, Sherlock. I'm not too proud to admit that either. So fuck off for that judgemental look.

[Jack here: for the record, there was no judgment. He was projecting his own insecurities.]

The day we found Andrea, well…that was a good day in my books.

CHAPTER NINE

CLYDE

It happened when I ended up sick.

I got hit with the flu, I honest to God thought I was going to die. Nothing would stay in me - and I mean nothing. I had the shits all the time, like water almost and if it wasn't coming out of my ass, I was throwing it up.

I was so weak, there was nothing we could do but camp down at the bridge and ride it out.

Penny wouldn't leave my side. She called in sick from the library and nursed me back to health.

If she hadn't - I wouldn't have survived.

I don't remember much about that time. I was in and out of it, sleeping or shitting, that was my world for what felt like forever.

No, I'm not being poetic about it. I wanted to die, thought I was going to die. I swear to God I've never been that sick before in my life. Food poisoning didn't even come close, and living on the streets, eating whatever the fuck we could find - we got sick enough in the beginning. Built up immunity for a bit - until I got hit with the fucking flu.

I remember waking up one time, feeling so hot and gross. The tent was zipped up tight and smelt like a nasty garbage can. When I unzipped the door, I didn't find Penny anywhere.

Instead, I found Andrea.

She was sitting there, in an army green lawn chair, can of soda

sitting in the holder and had this look on her face.

What was the look? Well, it sure as hell wasn't pity or even surprise. It was more like 'about time', you know?

I think I grunted something like 'who the fuck are you?' to her.

She handed me the can of soda and told me to go wash up, that she didn't want to see me again until I smelled like flowers.

Someone had set up this old outdoor camp, and built it from a bunch of stolen supplies. The person running it handed me a bag that they got from some Good Samaritan - it was full of those travel-sized shampoos and soaps, yeah, the things you get in hotels.

I used it all up. I shampooed my hair, my body, scrubbed as hard as I could, brushed my teeth and made sure I smelled like the fucking lemon scent that was on the bottles.

I can't tell you how nice it felt to wash up.

By the time I dried off, my clothes were gone and someone had replaced them. Figured that person was Andrea.

She had a smile on her face when I returned. Told me she cleaned up the tent and to go back to bed and sleep like a normal person, that she had things from here and we'd chat after.

Now, most people would argue with a complete stranger, but there was something about Andrea that told me I could trust her.

So I did.

I crawled back into the tent, kept that door open though for the fresh air, and slept like a baby.

Best damn sleep I'd had in a long time too.

When I woke up, both her and Penny were in the tent, watching me.

Andrea introduced herself. Penny introduced me. I kept quiet and just watched the two.

Didn't take me long to figure out Penny found a mom. Exactly what she needed.

Our family expanded and I was okay with that.

No questions asked.

If Penny trusted her, so did I.

Yeah, it was that easy.

We all fell into a good routine. I didn't have to be watching her 24/7 anymore, which was nice. I felt like I could breathe, and I wasn't Penny's emotional punching bag anymore.

Oh, don't get me wrong - she didn't do it on purpose.

The things with kids - when they feel safe with you - they give you everything they have. That also includes the bad stuff, the yelling, screaming, name calling, all the rotten junk of emotions that fill them up. We're the punching bag, the garbage can, the ones they can vent to and exercise those demons with.

Sure as hell ain't fun or easy and for the first time in a long time, I got a break.

Andrea handled things a lot differently than me.

I was the strong silent type. I'd take what she said, what she did, and put it in a box. I wouldn't react. I wouldn't act out on my frustrations either - because she didn't deserve that from me.

From me - she needed to know I was safe. She could say what she wanted. Do what she wanted. Scream and kick all she wanted and I wouldn't hurt her or retaliate.

Make sense?

Now, Andrea…she wasn't me. She put up boundaries and made sure Penny knew about them.

It was a rough go at first, I'll say that.

I'm told that's natural. In the sessions I've had here with the head shrinks, they tell me that even though kids needs boundaries, they're still going to fight against them.

I swear I wasn't like that as a teen.

You probably weren't either. We were boys. Boys aren't as emotional as girls. They're fucking nightmares when they want to be.

Andrea handled it well though. She'd tell me she had it and I didn't need to worry.

Wish she'd come into our lives a hell of a lot sooner, let me say that.

Girls need moms in their lives. Moms who care. Moms who watch over. Moms who will make them lunches and make sure they wake up for school or jobs. Who are on their asses about being clean and washing their clothes, or how late to be out at night. Moms who will wait up for them at night and listen to their sobs stories or go pick them up when they've drank too much at a party.

Penny didn't have that kind of mom.

She also didn't have that kind of life. But she should have.

She fucking should have.

CHAPTER TEN

CLYDE

It was the middle of the summer, and we decided to go camping.

Actual camping. You know, out in the woods, with no one but nature around us, type of camping.

Wasn't hard to get out there - hitchhike down the road, catch a ride in the back of a pickup truck and then pick a trail until you find a spot you like.

It was nice to get away city, from the people and smells, and just be alone.

We should have done it sooner.

Andrea was actually the one who came up with the idea.

We swam in the lake, lazed about on the grass, got a nice tan, and cooked the fish we'd caught on an open fire, never once being worried about people sneaking up or telling us to leave.

Sure, there were a lot of animals, and the sounds had Penny extra wary, but she'd never gone camping before, not out in the woods like that.

She might not admit it - but she had fun, I know she did.

We all did. We all were free to be as we please and we all swore we'd do this more often.

Penny had a shift at the library, and Andrea worked at the diner just next door to the library, so we had to head back into the city.

Didn't take long for someone to pick us up. It was a man, an older guy, in a pickup and he offered us a ride back into the city.

Penny didn't want to go with the guy, she wanted to wait for someone else - someone who wasn't alone. Andrea left it to me, and I knew I'd take on the guy if I had to.

I wasn't worried.

I told Penny to sit in the back with Andrea and have a nap, that I'd sit with the asshole in the front and protect them.

She trusted me. They both did.

I should have stayed alert, you know? But there was something about the lull of being on the road, it was getting dark and the guy offered me his extra burger he'd picked up at the truck stop.

I was a fool.

I fell asleep.

By the time I came to, he was on top of Penny, pants down to his knees, and she was screaming bloody murder.

That was the first time I'd ever killed someone, Jack. Also the first time I'm admitting what I actually did.

You can't imagine how I felt when I realized Penny was screaming my name. Andrea was nowhere to be found - we were at a little rest stop on the side of the road, all alone, and she must have gone to the washroom.

I fucking wish Penny had joined her.

I managed to get the asshole off Penny. The guy had a hammer sitting on the floor by my feet, so I grabbed that and went to town on his pecker. My only thought was to make sure he never did that again to anyone else.

I remember Penny's eyes, how wide with fear they were and I saw red. I moved from his penis to his face and used all of my force to smash that bastard's head in.

Reminded me of a rotten pumpkin, truth be told.

I pulled him from the cab and dragged him, feet first, to behind the washroom building, then I started calling for Andrea.

By the time I made it back to the truck, Andrea was there, cleaning up the mess I'd made.

Penny was outside, throwing up in the grass.

No one said a word. Andrea and I cleaned things up as best we could, and then we took off.

I think we were all in shock, truth be told.

That was the quietest ride we'd ever taken. No one said a word, the only sound was the sound of tire treads on the pavement.

First thing I did when we got to the city was pull into a shopping centre and switched plates from a truck similar to the one we were in.

The truck was actually quite nice. It was spacious, one of those pickups that had a nice passenger area. There was enough room for Penny to sleep on the seats, Andrea to sleep on the floor once we put some pillows and blankets down, and me to sleep in the front that first night.

The guy had a lot of cash in his truck. It was hidden everywhere, under the seats, in the glove box, in the middle seat box, beneath the seats in the back, and even in the tool box he had on the truck bed.

There was a good twenty thousand or so - we'd hit the fucking jackpot.

Where did the guy get the money from? Who the hell knows. He could have robbed a place for all I know and care.

What was important was the fact it was all ours.

Andrea said we had to keep the money and not use it, not until we had to.

I told her we should get ourselves a fucking apartment with it, pay for a year or two or hell, even five in cash, but she put her foot down.

She wouldn't let us use any of the cash until it was necessary.

So what did we use? We used his fucking credit cards. The guy had to be fucking rich because we had no issues using his cards to buy ourselves a shit ton of food, clothes, and supplies and charged it all.

Went through with no issues.

I'd like to say I knew was I was doing as a criminal, but I had no

clue. I only pretended that I did.

The next day, Penny went to work at the library, Andrea at the diner, and I stayed in that truck and watched for the cops to come.

No one did.

So, that night, we took another chance and went to a motel that was out of the way and charged a room to the guy's card. It went through, no issues. We showered, cleaned up good, and put all our old clothes and stuff in garbage bags.

We didn't throw the stuff in the dumpster there. We weren't that stupid.

You know the first place the cops would look was where the last time his cards were used, was, right?

It would have been nice to rest in that hotel room, but we couldn't. Sure, I hid his body as best I could, but we were all in a panic and no one was thinking straight back at that rest stop. Who knows when his body would have been found?

The next day, while the girls were at work, I took the garbage bags and went across town, to the industrial area. I found an old junker spot and threw the bags in the trash there. Then I went on the hunt for a beat-up truck bed camper.

We couldn't stay in hotel rooms for long - eventually, someone was going to find the asshole and they'd be watching the cards. Andrea wouldn't let us pay for a room in cash, and I sure as hell wasn't going to sleep in that truck. Not like we had.

So, the only other option was to find a camper to go on the bed.

You'd think they'd be hard to find, right? Not if you know what you're looking for.

I found this junker place that had a few - they were off to the side and definitely overlooked. I paid for it in cash, even paid the guy extra to hoist it up onto the truck and secure it in place.

It wasn't much, that's for sure.

It had some shelves. It had a bed area. It had a seating area. It had an area that I knew Andrea could create into a small kitchen. The guy I bought it from gave me some ideas on how to transform

it.

Before the girls were done shift, I went to a shop and bought a small barbecue set up, the ones that run on coals, and then went to a second-hand shop and got some pots and plates.

No more were we going to sleep beneath a bridge.

We were going to live a life of camping.

Girls were kind of pleased about it too. It wasn't perfect, that's for sure. It was a shit-ass camper with a few holes we had to fix, but we made it ours.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CLYDE TO JACK

That was probably the best time in my whole life.

How fucking sad is that, huh, Jack?

Didn't last long, of course it didn't, but for the time it did - it was fucking heaven.

I had my family and I was happy.

Here's the problem with happiness…the moment you feel it, something comes to steal it.

I should have known better.

I think I always knew, there was inkling, you know, in the back of my head, that scratchy feeling when you know something is wrong…

No, I didn't think we'd get caught for the guy we left.

It was something else. Just couldn't put my finger on it.

Let me tell you though, I wasn't the only one who felt that way.

Penny was always looking over her shoulder.

Andrea was always wanting us to be careful, real careful.

Me, I was always on the lookout. You can never be too careful.

There were parks everywhere there so we didn't have issues finding places to park at night.

We had a routine - I'd drop the girls off for their shifts, tinker on the truck, stay near in case they needed me, be there to pick them up, and then we'd head off somewhere to park for the night.

Sometimes it was on a side road.

Sometimes it was in a field.

Hell, sometimes we'd find the perfect spot overlooking the valley and we'd stay there for days.

We were free as birds, you know?

Until the day he walked into the diner.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CLYDE

Both my girls were on lunch break. We sat in a corner booth of the diner and shared a large basket of fries with vinegar and pepper.

It was one of those ho-hum kinds of days, you know? When the sun is shining, when the heat makes you sleepy and the last thing you want to do is work.

I was shoveling fries into my mouth and paid no attention to the bell over the door.

Yeah, it was that kind of diner - small, yellow counters, brown booths, stains on the floor from years of grime. They had good fries, though, and Andrea got her lunch for free when she worked.

Like I said, I was shoveling fries into my mouth and wouldn't have paid attention to Penny if it wasn't for Andrea nudging me.

The girl had gone white and was slowly shrinking in the seat, sliding down to hide.

What the fuck was going on?

I looked up, and wouldn't you know it, her fucking asshole of a father walked in.

He didn't see her. Not at first. He took a seat on the other side of the diner and ordered coffee.

Andrea went to get up after I told her who it was, said she wanted to pour the coffee over his dick and hopefully burn him, but Penny wouldn't let her.

Not too long after, a woman in a short skirt walked in and

joined him at his table.

Didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on.

I watched them the whole time - her rubbing her high heels over his legs, up to his crotch.

Him edging his fingers along her thigh and up to where they shouldn't have been.

I didn't need to ask if that was Penny's mom cause we all know it wasn't.

Daddy there was having an affair.

Well, well, well. I wanted to get up and confront him, but Andrea wouldn't let me. Said it wasn't worth it, that Penny ran for a reason, and to leave things be.

Leaving things be isn't who I am, but I did it.

For Penny. For Andrea.

So I ate the rest of those fucking fries and then drummed my fingers on the table, counting the minutes until that fucktard left.

You would have thought they'd take off and find a room in some sleazy joint, but no, they ordered burgers and fries and took forever to eat.

Slowly the diner emptied, to the point where we could hear what they talked about.

Just watching them, you could tell they'd known each other for a while. Their conversations weren't about getting to know each other, it was more like her bitching because he was never around, him defending himself with having to work all the time, and not once did it come up that he was married.

Not one fucking time.

They were getting ready to leave, which was good because Andrea's break was about over and a mother with a small child walked in.

The woman Penny's asshole of a dad was with cooed over that child. It was disgusting.

She said something about wanting one of her own, and Penny's dad told her to keep dreaming. Said he hated kids, never wanted

them, and she'd better decide then and now what was more important, him or a kid.

Talk about a prick.

Penny, she heard. She heard, and from the way her hands fisted up, she was pissed.

Andrea went back to work, and I walked Penny over to the library. I didn't know what to say, not really, and I was walking back to the truck when I heard her scream.

The asshole saw her and stood in her face.

Before I could get to them, he slapped her, good and hard.

She took it good too. Didn't step back. Didn't cry.

Her chin went up, he spit on her, and she said something I couldn't hear.

By the time I was at her side, he was gone.

She gave me one look and said don't fuss.

I had two options: I could fuss until she got grumpy with me or I could take action.

I chose action.

I ran after the bastard and surprised him just as he opened his car door.

Know what I did? I ran into that door with all my weight and nailed him hard on the side.

Sure, I didn't do much damage, but I caught him off guard.

Then I punched him. Right in the throat.

The bitch in the car with him was screaming. He was bent over, hands around his neck, and I knew I'd got him good.

Fuck, it felt…like I took care of my girl, you know?

I leaned in close to his ear and told him the next time he saw me, I'd kill him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CLYDE

I wasn't lying, Jack.

I was going to fucking kill him, if that's the last thing I did.

We were always watching out for him after that, but he never showed up again.

Days went on, weeks went by and the holidays was on our doorstep.

We still slept in that truck - the nights were a little cooler but I picked us up a small space heater that kept us nice and toasty.

I suggested we do something for Christmas. Maybe go away somewhere. It wasn't like we were tied down to that place.

We'd spend the nights, looking up at the stars, and think about where to go.

Penny liked to daydream the most. When push came to shove though, she wouldn't leave.

Turns out, she was seeing her mom here and there. They'd meet up for coffee in the mornings, on the sly.

Penny was worried about her. Kept trying to get her to leave, but she wouldn't.

In the end, she chose to stay with the asshole who not only abused her but cheated on her, too.

I never understood that. I mean…why stay?

Penny offered her to come stay with us. She tried giving her money. She tried everything, but none of it mattered.

Kids shouldn't have to try that hard, you know?

It was days before Christmas. Penny went about and bought her mom a really nice gift. They arranged to have coffee and do an early Christmas together. She gave her mom the gift - a nice sweater. Her mom gave nothing in return.

Well, she did. She said the words that needed to be said to get her daughter out of her life.

"Whatever you say happened to you, is just in your mind, like everything else. You need help, and I can't do this anymore. I love your father. He's not perfect, but I'm not leaving him. You're not even his, did you know that? He still raised you. Loved you. You need to apologize. Then you can come home. Until then, don't contact me again."

What a fucking bitch.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CLYDE

That fucking bitch broke my girl's heart and I wanted to kill her.

Strangle her. Dump her body in the river. Erase her from our life.

I don't know if it was true or not - that part about not being his daughter. I didn't care then and I don't care now.

Family isn't blood. It isn't sperm donation either. Family is a choice and that bitch chose wrong.

Christmas is supposed to be a fucking happy time, don't you think? With lights and music and cookies and…just happy, you know?

Penny wanted to hide. She was ready to just give up and give in but no fucking way was I going to let that happen.

Andrea, she got us a tree. Not a big one. One of those last-minute-deals types of trees that no amount of decorations could make look good.

We tried though. We went to some second-hand shops and bought trinkets. We cut out stars and snowflakes and hung them from the tree. We spent a little bit of that money we found and bought her some gifts, even made sure they were wrapped all pretty, and then we even got her a stocking.

She was too old to believe in Santa, but no one is too old for a stocking.

I told Andrea I wanted to take care of filling that stocking and

she let me.

I put in some of those sweet oranges Penny loved so much. I also got her some nice socks to keep her toes warm at night and some chocolate treats I knew she'd eat in one sitting.

I wanted that girl to be loved and to know she wasn't missing out on anything.

On Christmas Eve, Andrea brought home leftovers from the diner and we ate a feast of sorts.

The only thing missing were cookies. We decided to go out shopping, see if we could find a store or something open, one that would have cookies.

Guess we forgot everything was closed, you know? But we didn't want to head back to our spot, so we drove through town, looking at all the pretty lights and decorations people had on their lawns.

It was a nice memory.

Somehow, and don't ask me why, we ended up on Penny's old street.

She wanted me to pull over. I thought it was a bad idea. I knew it was a bad idea, but she begged, so what else could I do?

I pulled over and we all stared at her house.

It was lit up like a fucking tree and had all these fake snowmen outside on the lawn.

She told us that Christmas was her mom's favorite season of the year, that she'd decorate both the inside and outside, always make sure there were cookies fresh from the oven and hot cocoa to drink.

She made it sound like she lived in the perfect house, with the perfect family.

She almost had me believing it too.

Then she told us about a tradition her father started when she wasn't even four years old.

Her mom would go upstairs to finish wrapping gifts and he'd have Penny help him wrap a special one for her mom.

Penny would get all excited, because he told her he bought something special for the mom from Penny, and it was downstairs,

in the basement. He also said he had a special gift just for her, a secret that her mom couldn't know about.

Fucking basement.

Fucking secrets.

Fucking asshole.

He'd rape her down there. He'd give her a special present all right. His penis.

She told us that story and I swore I'd cut it off him.

Andrea said she'd help.

Penny said she just wanted some cookies.

Her favorites were the thumbprint ones. Said she'd make them with her mom and while they usually put jam in the middle of the cookie, sometimes her mom would add chocolate.

Andrea and I couldn't stop staring at each other as Penny told us about what happened to her.

I swear we had this connection like we knew what the other was thinking.

We asked each other the same question.

All it took was a slight nod and it was done. We'd both answered.

Andrea asked Penny how she'd like to sleep in her old bed again, and maybe make some fresh cookies tonight.

There was a look of hope that was quickly squashed. She wasn't apologizing.

I told her the one who would be apologizing was her father.

Andrea said her mother had to apologize too. I didn't see a problem with that at all.

A smile grew on Penny's face as she realized what we were saying, and she hopped out of the truck like a bunny after a carrot and asked us what our favorite cookies were.

She promised her mother probably already made them.

I was already in the mindset that I was going to fucking kill the father, but when we walked up to the door and he was the one who answered, fuck yeah, he was going to die.

He stood there, a sly grin on his face, and asked Penny if she were here for his special gift.

[Jack here: I told Clyde to take a minute. The guy is deteriorating fast and the anger radiating from his body is taking a toll. I suggested that we end the story here, because I knew what was going to come: if he continued, he was going to give himself a heart attack or worse. I had the needle in my hand and was ready to sedate him regardless of what he said next.]

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CLYDE TO JACK

Fine. Fuck man, no need to threaten me with that shit. I'll calm the fuck down.

Besides, you know what happened anyway, right?

I had a knife in my hand and thrust it right into his balls, twisting and turning as I did so. He staggered backward as we walked in and…

Stop. No, serious, fine, I'll calm down.

Cookies: Penny asked me what my favorite cookie was. Any ideas?

The girl didn't lie. When she said her mom baked them all, she was right.

On the kitchen table were plates and cookie containers full of all types of Christmas cookies.

I went immediately for the sugar cookies. She had plain ones, ones coated with just sugar, and then others all decorated real nice with icing and shit.

I took that whole plate and ate them while I watched her father bleed to death.

Yeah, I cut his penis and his balls off. I swore I would, and so I did.

Well, I swore I'd cut his penis off. The balls were just for the fun of it.

I keep my promises.

I think you're right, Jack.

It's time.

Plus I know you won't talk to the others until I'm gone, right?

You've more confessions to hear tonight, and maybe they'll finish my story, eh?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JACK

Clyde passed quick.

He was there one second and then he was gone.

I'd like to say it was because of me, because of the shot I gave him, but his death isn't on my hands. Not tonight.

I wasn't kidding when I said he wasn't going to make it.

I sat there watching him. I thought I would have gotten more, you know?

Here's what I got…he loved Penny with a fierceness that he'd even kill for her.

He enjoys camping. French fries. Sugar cookies.

Almost makes me want to have some, which coincidentally, I have a box of cookies sitting at the nurses' station, just waiting for me to open. Mom sent them in with me

Yep. I think it's time for a sugar cookie. Maybe even in a ball shape…in memory of Clyde, of course.

Fucking balls, man. It's enough to cut off a man's penis, but to go for the balls too…dude, that's painful.

SUGAR COOKIE RECIPE

These are Clyde's favorite cookies. Yeah, surprised me too. Didn't take him for a sweet guy, you know?

Mom says I'd stuff my mouth with these as a kid and always begged her to make more on the weekend.

COOKIE Ingredients:

2 cups flour
1/4 tsp salt
1/2 tsp baking powder
1 stick of butter (1/2 cup)
1 cup sugar
1 egg beaten
2 tbsp milk
1/2 tsp vanilla extract

FROSTING Ingredients:

1 lb confection sugar (or icing sugar)
1 stick butter (or 1/2 cup)
1 tsp vanilla
3-4 tbsp milk

How to Make:

1. Whisk together dry ingredients in a bowl.
2. Cream butter, sugar together with a mixer until creamy.
3. Add dry ingredients slowly and mix until combined.

4. Add egg, milk and vanilla. Mix until it looks ready.

5. Transfer dough to the counter. Shape into 2, cover with plastic wrap and place in fridge for 1 hr.

6. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line baking sheet with parchment paper.

7. Take chilled dough out of the fridge. Flour your working surface and roll out each ball until 1/8 inch thick.

8. Cut into shapes with cookie cutters and place on baking sheet, leaving space between cookies.

9. Bake for 10 min (do not brown them).

10. Transfer to wire racks to cool.

To make the frosting:

1. Blend all ingredients in a mixer. Add more or less milk for desired consistency.

2. Frost cookies.

PATIENT ANDREA

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Thank you to Chiffon for naming Penny's asshole of a parental figure.

Thanks to Danielle Bowen for naming Andrea. Hope she fits the name well!

CHAPTER ONE

JACK

The cookies.

You'd think my staff would have waited until I was there to open the box, right?

No.

Apparently, all is fair when it comes to my mom's baking. Asshats, the lot of them.

It's a good thing she gave me two boxes - one to share and one for myself.

She spoils me, and I know it.

There's still cookies in this box, so I don't go to my secret stash…I'll save those for later.

The first cookie I ate was a sugar cookie, covered in sugar sprinkles, just how I like them.

Listen, I'm not picky. If the sugar cookie has all that icing shit on it, I'll eat it. They're just not my favorite, you know? With that icing on it, it gets all hard, and there's a crunch to the cookie I don't enjoy.

Sugar cookies are meant to be soft and fluffy. I'll fight you on that any day of the week.

Ike comes along, whistling some merry tune, and I hand him the last sugar cookie in the container.

"To Clyde," I say.

"To the assfuck," Ike says as he takes a bite. "He really was a

grumpy shit, wasn't he?"

I stick the rest of the cookie in my mouth. "Nah, you just needed to get to know him. He only had two sides - gruff exterior and a soft heart for Penny."

Ike doesn't say shit, not until he decides to grumble about my choice of music.

"This year, you need to let us add some songs, man. This crap you have on there sucks."

"Like I'd let you add some of that Swift shit."

He punches me in the shoulder. "Lay off the Taylor, man. That girl has some mad skills and doesn't need your judgment."

In case you haven't figured it out yet, Ike's soft heart includes listening to Taylor Swift songs.

"On, that note, let's make a bet." He's got his arms crossed but the way he looks over his shoulder, he's up to something.

"I bet I know who you'll be chatting with next."

Like that is a surprise. Even I know who I'll be chatting with next.

"And if you're right?"

"I want a box of your mom's cookies." He doesn't even hesitate when he says it.

I pretend to think about it, but knowing Mom is already making him and his wife a tray of goodies, I don't care if I win or lose.

"Are your verses ready for them, yet?"

Ike rubs his hands together in glee. "Are my versus ready? Who do you think I am?" He reaches over the ledge to the desk below and pulls out a sheet of paper from beneath a patient folder.

Deck the halls with love and kisses,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Fill your boots with knives and shiv…es,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Be a mother, love your daughter…
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la

Kill the woman who let someone abuse her,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la.

"That's your weakest one yet," I tell him.

"I've never chatted with her before, so it's the best I can do." He gives me a shrug and I leave it alone.

He's not lying. Hardly anyone has chatted with Andrea. Since coming here, she's been quiet like a church mouse, only I doubt she's ever been inside a church before.

It's rare that we ever get partners in this place, but this bunch… they're a special breed.

Where Clyde was hard and ugly-tempered, Andrea is even worse. Think…. Alias with Jennifer Garner but uglier and meaner and definitely without that girl-next-door smile.

Now that I think about it, maybe Andrea resembles Elektra or even that Peppermint movie the actress was in, instead of the sweet Sydney Bristol. It's been a while since I watched that series…maybe it's time to do some late-night binge-watching again - and don't you fucking judge me for that. That shit was good, and you'd know that if you watched it.

CHAPTER TWO

'There Ain't No Sanity Clause' by The Damned played over the speakers. The grin shooting across my face must be contagious because the rest of my staff, who are chomping down on the cookies, are all grinning too.

"Get your fat asses back to work, you lazy bums." There's no bite in my bark, and they all know it.

After stuffing another cookie in my mouth, I head back down the wing to have a chat with my next patient.

"Hey, Jack, you forgot something?" Ike calls.

Fucking bastard. I pivot and make sure he can see the eye roll I'm giving him.

We're close enough that I catch the stupid Santa hat he throws my way.

"A bet's a bet," he says.

I stuff that sucker on my head, making sure it's lodged good. I even give the fucking little puff ball a swat with my hand, and if I could, I'd smack that shit-grinning smile off Ike's face.

I give the door a firm knock and push it open.

I don't really know what to expect if I'm honest. I don't know Andrea. She doesn't know me. I've never talked to her before, which makes this…an interesting conversation.

Will she share her story?

The fuck I know.

This could be a quick talk. Or it could be a long one.

Normally, I come prepared. This time, I have no idea what's

about to happen.

"You must be Jack."

Andrea is sitting on the bed, hands folded on her lap. Her voice is husky, like a smoke-two-cigarette-packs-a-day kind of husky. If she were younger, it might come across as sexy.

"You must be Andrea." I pull the chair out and plop my ass down.

"I've been told I need to talk to you. If it were up to me, I'd go quiet, like I've lived my life in here, but I'm told that's not allowed."

I hold my hand up. "Whoa, wait a minute. I've got a shit ton of things to do if I'm not needed here. Don't let me stop you from going the way you want." I hesitate for a split second before I heave myself to my feet.

"Don't be a jerk," she says. "Sit down."

"I was told we needed to have a chat, so a chat is what we'll have."

I give her a nod. If that's what she wants, fine then.

She stares at me for a long while then her head gives a quick shake-style move.

"Everything okay?" I don't remember anything being said about ticks in her file.

"I forgot to open my mouth."

I lean forward. "Come again?"

"I've lived in my head for so long, not saying much, not needing to, that I forgot I needed to open my mouth for you to hear what I wanted to say."

My lips turn in a slight grin. Yeah, I get that.

"Living in your head, is nice, isn't it? Having those one-way conversations when no one speaks back…I get that."

She lifts a shoulder in a shrug. "Didn't need to say much in the nursery, you know? There's plenty of mother hens down there, it was nice to be in the background."

Which explains why no one knows much about this woman.

"I can sit here in silence, if that's what you'd prefer."

“No. I said we’d chat. If I go silent for too long, just nudge me.”

I give her a nod and lean back in my chair, getting comfortable.

“Cute hat, by the way,” she says. “Kind of surprising, seeing you wear it.”

I scratch my scalp; it’s itching like hell under this thing.

“If he takes it off, you give me a holler, will you?”

I knew Ike stood outside the door, those damn squeaky shoes of his give him away every time.

“I figured you might appreciate a warm blanket,” he says as he lays it over her legs. She pulls it up to her chest, and her shoulders push back against her pillow with delight.

“Why not bring a second one, cover her up completely,” I tell him. These things aren’t that big, so with her pulling it up, half her legs aren’t covered anymore.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” she says.

I can tell she wants to ask something. She mulls it over, his eyes moving around the room, never quite landing on me. I leave her be, giving her time to say what she needs to say.

I could probably answer her without the question even being asked.

“So you met Clyde.”

I nod. Okay, not quite the question I was expecting. “I did. He’s quite the…character. Told me a little about his relationship with Penny, which sounded a little different than yours, am I correct?”

“Yes and no. We were both parental figures to her, for her. He loved her differently, so I guess, yes, you’d be right. When she came into his life, he needed her. She was a grounding force for him. For me…well, it was a little different. I knew right away what she needed from me, and from day one, I gave her that.”

She worried her lip a little. “I guess, for both of us, the moment Penny came into our lives, it was all about her, which is what happens to most parents, don’t you think? You merge from being a person, an individual, to being someone’s caretaker, nurturer, parent…and for the rest of your life, that’s how you are defined.”

“Did you not want to be her mother?”

She looks at me then, with such clarity in her gaze.

“I was born to be her mother, Jack. I knew that from the moment we met. That has been my destiny, since the day I was born.”

CHAPTER THREE

ANDREA TO JACK

I know a lot about you, Jack. Are you surprised?

The girls in the nursery talk about you often. You need to go down there and visit more. Some of the girls have quite the crush on you.

They have it all decorated, did you know? The tree is up, and it's strung with popcorn again.

Being in that nursery, it was interesting. I could have been a mother down there. Some of the girls, they could have used me, but you know that saying about too many cooks in a kitchen?

The same can be said about too many mothers in a nursery.

I was happy being in the background, following along.

The routine down there is a nice one. Boring, but nice.

There could have been worse places to end up, right?

Besides, I didn't like when I said I was born to be Penny's mother. She's the only one I've ever cared about, the only one that matters to me. All the others, they annoyed me.

Clyde even annoyed me.

The bugger is gone, isn't he? I can't say I'm sorry. He's the reason we're here, after all. He's the one who put us in the mess in the first place. If they'd just listened to me, we would have been fine, we would have made it out just fine.

But no. Clyde saw Penny was hurting and he reacted.

Reactions aren't always the smartest gameplay, right, Jack?

You don't react. I know this already about you. You take your time.

You size up what's happening and you make the right move at the right time. Don't think I wasn't watching you.

We all have been watching you.

You've made quite the name for yourself here. Are you proud of that?

I know about your deals. I'm not here for it.

We'll chat, because that's what I was told to do, but when I die, I die on my terms, okay?

I know I don't have long. I can feel it. I see it.

What do I see?

It's not a white light, if that's what you're wondering. It's not flames either.

I see a chair. A nice, comfy, cozy chair, where I can curl up in, lay a blanket over my lap and read.

Doesn't that sound like heaven to you? It does to me.

What do I read?

Oh, not westerns like Clyde, that's for sure.

Give me the drama. Give me the complicated mess of life and let me read about how they navigate through their choices. I especially like memoirs. The messier the better. I mean, if they can make it out, anyone can, right? Well…not anyone. You understand what I'm trying to say, right?

I thought once that we could make it out of our mess. And then Clyde came in and made it even more of a tangle.

You don't always have to choose death or violence. I wish people would realize that.

I wish we had realized it.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANDREA

The first time I met Penny, she'd been sitting outside her tent, curled up in front of a fire she couldn't keep going and had her face buried in her legs. The poor girl was quietly sobbing and no one around offered her any help or support.

That was about to change.

I reached out for her hand and pulled her up. I smoothed her hair, wiped her tears, and taught her how to actually get a fire going.

I didn't coddle her. I have never coddled that girl. She's been through so much, you could see it etched all over her face…a girl like that would break into a million pieces if she were coddled.

I wouldn't be the one to break Penny.

Instead, I helped her heal.

That girl, she was a prickly pear from the get-go, and she wore her clothing like armor.

She was scared, though, that was clear as day.

She was also alone.

Clyde there, he was sick, and she didn't know what to do.

So, I did the only thing I could do…I stayed with her. I brought over my chair, and we sat at that fire, and I listened to her talk.

That girl, you could see the pain in her eyes, you could hear the loneliness in her voice, you could see the fear radiate through her body. I think being there, sitting beside her, listening, it helped.

No, I know it did.

Living in that camp, the girl had guts. I don't know if you know much about those homeless camps, but being in prison is safer. How that girl remained unscathed, still shocks me.

Guess it shouldn't, considering she had Clyde.

The first time I met him, he came out of that tent looking like death warmed over. I handed him something to drink and told him to go shower.

I needed to do something about that tent because it was disgusting. The man was sicker than a dog in there, and it stunk to high heaven. Not even hosing it out helped. I tossed the sleeping bag and blankets into the fire, cleaned that place out with soap and water, and let it air out as best I could.

I managed to find some new blankets and a sleeping bag for him but honestly, I wasn't sure if that would be enough.

When he came back from the shower, I told him to go back to bed. He was barely standing, being so weak.

He wanted to know where Penny was. I'd sent her off to get some air and find some food. He wasn't sure what to do with me, I could tell that right from the beginning, but he did what I said, he climbed back in the tent and slept.

Slept like a belly-full baby and snored, I haven't heard a man snore like that, ever.

We all meshed after that. Clyde would call us a family, which was true. We were a family.

Penny, for all her grown-up ways, was still a kid. A damaged kid in need of love that wasn't abusive.

That's what we gave her, Clyde, and I.

I was the mom. He was the older brother who protected his sister.

Our routine was focused on Penny.

I moved in with them, I guess you could say. I had my own tent, and my own supplies, so we grouped them together. People accepted us as we were, and left us alone, which was just how we

liked it.

Life was pretty boring. Penny was finishing up school and worked in a library, so that's where she spent most of her time. Me, I'd come back here, stay with our stuff, protect it, get the food ready, for when her and Clyde came back.

Clyde stayed with her all the time, never letting her out of his sight. When she was in school, he'd be out, picking up odd jobs and such, but he was always there when she was done, walking with her to the library and making sure she remained safe.

He had this thing about protecting her.

By the time summer came, we were in a good place, all of us, taking care of each other.

That never lasts, though. We think it does, but life always twists things around, taking measure of who you are, of what you can accomplish. The more you can offer, the more you go through, have you ever realized that?

I figured Penny had a lot to offer. That's the only reason she'd be so broken at such a young age.

She was beautiful, did Clyde tell you that? She tried to hide herself in dark clothing, extra baggy sweaters, and shirts, but you can't hide true beauty.

She had a prickly exterior, so that helped, but life on the streets, no matter what anyone says, is rough.

CHAPTER FIVE

ANDREA TO JACK

This isn't my story, I hope you know that.

My story doesn't matter. Who I was and what I did to survive, frankly, that's none of your business.

Look at me, Jack. Who do you think I used to be? Why do you think I ended up where I did?

It wasn't because I found my happily-ever-after, that's for sure.

There was no Prince Charming for me. No fairy godmother either. Life doesn't work that way, those types of lives, that's only make-believe, fairy tales, and it's full of lies and masks and empty hearts.

Tell me one person who's living their fairytale and hasn't had to make sacrifices for it to happen.

Life doesn't play fair, not for me, not for you, and not for the Queen of England either. You don't think she hasn't suffered? Even living in a gilded cage?

Being in here, in this godforsaken place, has probably been the easiest life has ever been for me. Imagine that, huh?

True, living in the nursery helps. There's a purity down there, where we're sheltered and protected, and for good reason. Those little ones, their minds are so broken, they can't handle the truth, wouldn't be able to live in the real world without falling apart.

You've been down there enough; you know what it's like.

I know Clyde didn't tell you everything, so my goal is to fill in some of those blanks, as best I can, from my own point of view. It won't be the

full story, how can it be, but it'll help, and that's what I was told I needed to do.

CHAPTER SIX

ANDREA

Everything changed for us that summer.

That summer, we saw the true depth of what we were willing to do to protect Penny.

In my mind, I've gone back, so many times, wishing I could change things.

I wouldn't have gone camping. Not there. Not then.

Or I would have left earlier. Later. Walked longer rather than hitch a ride.

At the same time, what happened that summer, it made us into who we were meant to be.

Yes, I truly believe that. Don't you? Don't you believe that you could only be who you are today because of what happened to you in your past? You wouldn't be as strong, wise, stubborn, opinionated, tempered…you'd be a different person, having lived a different life.

Going back in time, it wouldn't change anything, I don't think.

In the end, for Penny, she needed everything to happen that did happen, in order to be the person she is now.

All the ugly. All the bad. All the nightmares. All the good.

There was good.

That summer, while camping, that was good.

We lived simple lives. Carefree. Easy. Did what we wanted. Read what we wanted. Ate what we wanted. Slept where we wanted. We

didn't have to watch our backs, check the temperature of the crowd, be wary of the moods of others.

It was nice.

Camping was my idea. Which I guess means, everything that happened afterward was because of the choice I made for us.

Yeah, that's heavy. A heavy burden to carry. But again, we wouldn't be who we are if not for what we struggled through.

The transformation in Penny was surprising. She was free. She didn't have to be careful, watch over her shoulder, try to blend in and become non-existent in crowds. For that alone, it was worth going.

She was a child with no responsibilities. Clyde and I took care of everything for her. That's the kind of life she should have had.

Clyde didn't want to return. Neither did I, if I'm being honest. Penny took on the mantle of being an adult and was the one who convinced us to leave. Her and I had scheduled shifts - her at the library, me at the diner beside it, and without that money, we'd be off worse than we were.

So, return we did. We packed up and promised each other we'd come back. In fact, the next time we had even two days off in a row, we decided we'd go camping again.

Hitchhiking with a mammoth like Clyde wasn't easy. It took a guy in a pickup to come along for us to grab a ride.

Penny tried to tell the guy to move on. She thought getting a ride with a family, or a group of people would be safer. Single guy in a truck…anything could happen.

I didn't see the big deal. We had Clyde, who could take the guy on, and if we continued to wait, who knows when the next truck would come along. It wasn't like we'd fit in a small car with a family or even a group of friends who'd been out camping too.

We had a system when it came to making decisions: best two out of three votes. Everyone got a say and this time, it was Clyde who broke the standoff between Penny and me.

Clyde promised Penny he'd keep us both safe and to trust him.

So, we did. Why wouldn't we?

The drive back, it wasn't a quick one, and as much as I tried to keep my eyes open, I rested my head against the window and fell asleep. I wasn't worried - I knew Clyde wouldn't nod off. Penny was curled up on the seat, her head in my lap, and all was fine.

Something woke me up. It was probably the speed of the vehicle - we'd slowed down and made a turn.

When I asked the guy where we were, he said he had to make a pitstop. We were at one of those stops where outhouses were available. It was dark, barely any lights to see anything.

Both Clyde and Penny remained asleep.

The guy seemed harmless enough, you know? I got out and followed him toward the bathrooms.

I should have paid more attention. I was so focused on emptying my bladder, that I didn't realize he'd looped back to the truck.

It wasn't until I was outside that I heard this screaming.

I ran back to the truck and found Clyde pulling the driver's body. He waved me off and told me to go help Penny.

I blame myself. How can I not? I left her in the truck, thinking she was safe, not being aware of my surroundings.

I knew better. I. Knew. Better.

Penny was on her knees, an utter mess, and it only took one look for me to realize what had happened.

It wasn't the time for questions. It was the time for action.

I ran back to the truck and started to clean it. Whatever Clyde had done, he'd done it well, and there was blood and…other stuff… everywhere.

When Clyde returned, he returned alone. He carried a hammer in his hand, and that was it.

I remember looking back toward the building where I'd seen Clyde drag the man. I wanted to ask him what happened, what did he do with the man, but Clyde shook his head, and I kept silent.

It started to rain. That's one detail I'll always remember. I think I said a prayer at the first drop on my forehead.

The rain didn't help clean up the mess inside the pickup, but it sure did help to clean up the blood trail Clyde had made.

The guy had a box of garbage backs in the back. I made us put everything in there, everything I'd found to clean up the blood, Penny's clothes, Clyde's…we'd have to find somewhere to throw it out.

It was crazy how silent we all were. I wouldn't let Penny back in the truck until it was cleaned up.

The truck, it was new, with all those fancy compartments. We found a lot of stuff in there, including a lot of cash. I have no idea where it came from, why the man had it, but it was ours now and we needed to be smart about using it.

It wasn't until we saw the city lights ahead of us that Clyde finally asked what we were going to do.

The answer came easy enough to me. It was all I could think about.

We'd pull into the first shopping center, swap out plates and keep driving. We'd go as far as we could and be smart. The truck was spacious enough that if we bought some pillows and blankets, we could make the floor comfy enough for one of us to sleep on it. One would have the front, the other the back, and I'd be on the floor.

Clyde wanted to use the money to rent an apartment. There was enough there that we could pay in cash for years, if we found a cheap enough one.

I squashed that idea.

We were running. Clyde killed a man. Someone would eventually find him, and they'd come looking for his killers. We had no idea what was in store for us, and we needed to be smart with the money.

No one was looking for him now, though, and we had his wallet with credit cards inside, so we went into a store, bought food, clothes, and supplies, and charged it.

I let Clyde talk us into renting a motel for the night, but only so

we could all shower. People were giving us looks inside the store, and I didn't blame them. We cleaned ourselves as best we could, but we definitely needed showers.

I wanted to drive off that next day, but Penny threw a fit. This was her home. She had a job she liked, and she wasn't leaving.

This time, Clyde took her side. That was a mistake. One of many. We were on a collapsing hillside, aware of the instability of the ground beneath us but too stubborn to move.

While Penny and I went to work, Clyde took care of ridding evidence. I told him to go to the other side of town, find the industrial area, and throw the garbage out there. Change plates. Toss the wallet where it would never be found. He dropped us off and took off.

How I kept my cool that day, I will never know. I kept watching the window for Clyde to return, but the man took forever. Penny joined me at lunch, we sat in silence out in the back.

I kept trying to think about what we should do.

I'd paid up front for the hotel room for a few days but I knew we couldn't stay there. Someone was going to come looking for us. Somehow, I needed to convince Clyde and Penny that running was our best option.

We could find jobs anywhere.

If we were smart, we could make that money last us a long time.

By the time our shifts were over, Clyde was back.

He drove up in the pickup that now had a camper top on it.

I didn't say anything. One look at me and Clyde said everything I needed to.

We couldn't stay in the hotel room forever.

Sleeping in the truck like that wasn't going to work for long.

This was now our home away from home, and we could park anywhere with it.

Penny was watching me for my reaction. What could I do? What could I say?

It wasn't a horrible option. He'd used our money to buy it and

then outfit it with supplies, all found at local second-hand shops. He'd done his best to make it look presentable.

Somehow, I needed to figure out how to make it our home.

We moved around a lot in that truck, but never far enough from work. It was comfy enough, and we lived a life as full-time campers. We basically parked anywhere we wanted, in fields, on the side of the road, in campgrounds, at the end of dirt roads…we were vagabonds, and as long as Penny didn't care, then I did what I could to make it work.

Clyde, he was happy.

Penny, she still had nightmares, but when we locked the door at night to our little abode, she felt a measure of safety she never felt in her tent beneath the bridge - so I guess that was a win.

Me though, I never let myself get too comfortable.

One of the things we found in that truck was a gun. I kept that gun with me at all times.

One day, somehow, something was going to happen. One wrong step. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time…no matter how many times we changed the plate, or how careful we were with being seen, or how diligent I was in reading the paper or listening to the news…I knew one day that shoe would drop, and we'd be caught.

We should have left town like I'd said, but two to one…I could never get Penny to agree with me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ANDREA TO JACK

We all have a history. A past we would love to leave behind us.

I'm sure you've got skeletons in your closet, don't you?

You know what - I don't care if you do. That's your closet, with your skeletons, and it's none of my business.

That's how I've always viewed things. The past is a personal prison, and it's best to leave it be.

Penny's past gave her nightmares. Of course, I knew what happened to her, but I never asked her for details, never asked her for specifics.

I knew she had shitty parents. I knew running away was the only option for her. I knew the day she found Clyde was the day she realized life didn't have to be a never-ending nightmare.

I had no idea who they were, though, or what they even looked like.

I didn't feel like I needed to know.

I knew where she grew up, whenever Penny was behind the wheel, she'd drive to her old house.

I don't know what she was looking for, or what answers she'd find.

I didn't like it. Someone was going to notice and contact the police.

I was always super vigilant about stuff like that. Maybe too much.

Or maybe not enough, looking back.

It's easy to look back, isn't it? To see where you made the mistakes, the wrong turns, the questionable decisions.

Clyde told me I worried too much, and I was starting to agree with him. Started to think that I could stop looking over my shoulder so

much, stop jumping every time I heard police sirens, and stop assuming someone was about to find us.

I knew though, that the moment I let my guard down, something would happen.

I knew it.

Yet, I was still caught off guard. Funny how that happens, right?

I remember the day our world completely changed.

No, it wasn't from Clyde killing the man who thought he could rape Penny and get away with it.

It was the day her father walked into the diner during our lunch.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ANDREA

We sat in a corner booth of the diner and shared a large basket of fries with vinegar and pepper, something both Clyde and Penny loved. I rarely ate much - I could sneak the fries or other food during my shift, so I let them eat their fill.

Penny was telling me about a new shipment of books that came in, her face animated with our shared love for novels when all of a sudden, she went quiet, white, and slunk down in her seat.

I thought maybe she had a stomachache or her monthly came or something equally devastating like maybe a new crush of hers just walked in.

I glanced over toward the door to see a man. Nothing special. Nothing appealing. Nothing remotely life changing. Just a man.

His hair was cut short, he wore black pants and a dress shirt that was unbuttoned at the top, with no tie. He had his sleeves pushed up a little, revealing a gold watch and he looked tired.

One of the other waitresses told him to take a seat, and I honestly thought nothing more about it. Just another office worker in for lunch. We get a lot of them.

I thought maybe Penny had pinched something from him once, that she was worried he'd recognize her. If I'd thought about it, if I'd honestly paid attention, I would have made Penny leave the diner out through the back. No one would have noticed her, and we would have been fine.

Well, not fine, but you know what I mean.

It was Clyde who told me who the man was.

I went to get up, but Clyde stopped me, his hand on my arm, asking what I was planning to do.

I was planning to grab the coffee pot and pour it all over his junk, that's what I wanted to do. I wanted him to know pain, to experience it firsthand, but Penny said one word that stopped me.

No.

No. That was not the word I wanted to hear. I wanted her to give me a nod, to indicate I was free to reign hell, but she didn't do that.

I won't lie, as much as I was disappointed, I was also extremely proud of her.

She was right, of course. This was about her and what she needed.

We were quiet at that table, but the tension drumming between the three of us was deafening.

I was going to suggest we leave when a woman walked in.

She was dressed for attention, but any woman looking her way would see the red flags.

She was trying too hard. She'd lived too hard. She was a survivor. For a brief second, I felt for her.

We women…we're a tough breed and don't let anyone tell you differently. We know what it takes to survive, and we'll do anything to keep from falling apart. Even if we don't like it. Even when we know it makes us look weak. We do it because we hope one day, it will make us stronger.

Sometimes it does. Sometimes it just breaks us more.

This woman, she was doing all she could to get through, to make it, to better herself, and I even had a smile growing on my face.

Until she joined Penny's father.

Then she was just a bitch.

The display they put on was disgusting.

I knew that wasn't Penny's mother. Anyone would know that woman wasn't that man's wife. She was just a plaything, and playthings don't last.

This time it was Clyde who pushed himself to his feet, but I pulled him back down, reminding him to leave things be.

Penny was shaking her head as she watched the two of them, her eyes narrowing, her skin blooming with a shade of anger.

It didn't take a genius to know what was going on. This plaything wasn't just some fling, it was a long-term relationship where the woman was bitching because he was never around, and him defending himself, blaming it on work.

Bullshit.

We all know what they mean when they say work, right?

Even that woman knew, but she wasn't willing to admit it. Desperation oozed off of her.

Lunch hour was up, and I had to get back on the floor. I didn't know what to say to Penny if I'm being honest. I told her she was better off without him in her life, and she'd nod her head, but she didn't hear me.

You could see it in her eyes.

She was hurting. She was angry. She didn't know what to do.

They left, I went back to work, keeping an eye, making sure she got to the library with no issues.

Her father had left. He was seated in his car and yelling at the woman beside him.

I just wanted him to hurry up and leave, get out of our lives as fast as he could.

It was like I couldn't breathe until I knew he was gone.

My boss yelled at me from the back, and I turned my attention away, only briefly, but it was long enough that whatever happened outside, happened without me seeing it.

I heard about it though that night.

How there'd been a confrontation. How Clyde threatened the man after he'd gone after Penny.

Clyde was a ticking time bomb, ready to explode, to detonate the world on fire, if that's what it would take to protect Penny.

But it wasn't what she wanted.

She needed to know he was there for her. Ready to protect her if she needed it. But she didn't want him to do it - not yet.

She wasn't ready for that.

I did everything I could that night to coddle her. Yes, you heard me right. She was shook up, even hours afterward, she was off center, unsure of herself, thrust back into the past with all that hurt.

That kid didn't deserve any of it.

Clyde went on and on about the asshole of a father, but all I kept thinking about was her mother.

Did she know about the affair?

She obviously knew about the abuse. Why didn't she put a stop to it? Why didn't she leave with Penny when it all started?

Little by little, a slow burn settled inside me - a burn we both know became a raging fire.

CHAPTER NINE

ANDREA

While I was letting the fire of anger slowly burn in my soul, Penny wanted to see if she could forgive.

She's a better person than I ever have been.

She came to me one night and asked my opinion about something.

Did I think her mother would agree to see her?

I was taken aback, I'll admit it. I asked her why she wanted to see her mother, and her answer was both simple and powerful.

"Because she's my mom."

A child will always look for love from a parental figure.

They will always need acceptance, security, comfort from their mother.

It was a fist to the gut, her words. Yes, I knew I wasn't her mother by blood, but in my heart of hearts, I tried to fill that gap, but I obviously didn't do a good enough job of it.

That's what I thought at the time.

Now, I know better.

Now, I know I did my best. I did fill that void, to a degree. No matter how I tried though, I couldn't fill it completely.

There's a connection between a child and their mother that is beyond this world. A connection that can never be broken, no matter how damaged, distant, or forlorn the relationship is.

If my girl wanted to see her mom, then I would be there to

support her, help her, do what I could to make it happen…and then I'd be there to hold her, comfort her, dry her tears when her heart gets broken again.

Because I knew it would.

We all knew it would.

Clyde was against it, once he found out about it. He didn't understand why she would put herself in a situation like that, but Penny asked him to trust her.

Me, on the other hand…he was furious with me for not telling him about these meetings sooner. I didn't because Penny asked me not to, because we both knew he wouldn't like it.

She was trying to protect his feelings, but by keeping him in the dark, she was only hurting him more. The poor guy didn't know how to handle it. He felt betrayed, you could see that plain as day on his face, but he bucked up and asked what he could do to help.

Of all the men who have been in Penny's life, Clyde has been the most faithful, most forgiving, most loving, in my opinion.

The first time Penny met up with her mom was for coffee.

The hug between them was awkward at first, but by the time they pulled apart, they both had tears in their eyes.

I watched from a different table, off in the corner, out of the way.

I sat there wishing I could read that woman's mind. What was she thinking? What was she feeling? Was she happy to have her daughter back in her life? Has she been worried about Penny? Tried looking for her? Did she go to the police when Penny first ran away?

She sat at that table, her hands either clasped tight in her lap or wrapped around her coffee mug. Every so often she'd reach a hand out, to touch Penny, but it was a fleeting touch, like she was either unsure if the touch would be welcomed or if she wanted that much interaction with her daughter.

I didn't know how to feel.

I do now. But then, I didn't.

I only knew that Penny was more invested in this date than her own mother was, and I didn't like that.

The coffee lasted longer than I wanted it to, but Penny had a smile on her face when it was over.

They planned to meet up more often, to stay in touch, and Penny was over the moon with happiness.

That didn't last long, unfortunately.

Whenever they met up, Penny would ask, beg her mom to leave. She didn't understand why she stayed.

Neither did I, to be perfectly honest.

I started to hate these meet ups, mainly because of how they affected Penny. We'd return back to our little camper, and she'd curl up in bed, tight as a bug, covered in blankets and wouldn't talk to either of us for the longest time. It was like she needed to hide, to heal, to readjust her thinking before facing us.

We always gave her the time she needed.

I only ever offered advice if I was asked. I made sure not to overstep, not to push Penny in one direction or another, but I swear to you, Jack, if I could have figured out how to erase that mother of hers from her life without causing Penny pain, I would have.

I should have.

I guess I did, in the end, didn't I?

Every time she'd meet up, I was relegated to a table far enough away that I couldn't hear what was being said, so all I knew, all I shared with Clyde, was what Penny told me.

Bottom line, leaving her husband wasn't an option, despite everything he'd done to her daughter.

She chose him over Penny with no regrets.

That made me hate her.

How could you not put your child first? A child you bore. Of your own flesh and blood. A child that will always be yours, who would never betray you, never stop loving you…I couldn't, still can't, wrap my head around that.

Penny begged her to leave, said she could move in with us, that

we'd all get a small place, and that she could be free of the monster she lived with.

Her mother said no. Time and time again.

We were getting close to Christmas, and between you, me, and the past, I think Penny was hoping for a Christmas miracle.

Clyde and I both knew it wasn't going to happen.

Deep down, I think Penny knew too.

We tried to make it as festive as possible. We decorated our little camper van, found some cheap lights that we put up, I even got us a tree that we decorated with some homemade little things.

There was a sadness inside Penny that wouldn't go away.

I think reconnecting with her mom, especially before the holidays, was hard on her.

She bought her mom a gift, she'd been saving her money from being at the library and bought her mom a nice sweater.

She had this idea, of telling her mom about the money I had stashed away, of how we could use that to move someplace else, someplace far, and start over.

I told her in no uncertain terms, no.

I hid that money, and neither she nor Clyde knew where it was because I knew they'd find a way to spend it. I only took money out of it if it was a necessity.

She didn't like me telling her no, but what could she do? Sure, she could have told her mom about the money, but I wouldn't have given it to her, so she'd be left looking like a fool.

And yes, I would have kept it from her, even then. That money was our future. Our get out of jail card if it were ever needed.

The last time they met up was just before Christmas.

They met at a cute little diner that was offering a Christmas tea. Her mom's treat. Guess her mom figured that was a good enough Christmas gift for her daughter because that's the only one she ended up getting from the woman.

Penny struggled not to show it, but deep down, she was hurt. The girl was hoping to get invited to spend Christmas at home.

That didn't happen.

I sat close enough to hear the conversation this time, was there when Penny gave her mom her gift, a beautiful sweater her mother didn't deserve. A sweater I helped pick out.

The conversation was the same as it had been in the past. Penny begged her mom to leave. They could spend Christmas together, drive around and see all the lights, maybe even do a road trip for a few days, head to the beach…anything as long as it was the two of them.

She begged her mom to leave the man who raped her. Who abused her on a regular basis. Who was having an affair right now.

Her mother didn't believe her. There was this look that passed over her face…scorn, maybe? Disgust? I couldn't quite figure it out.

She told Penny that maybe all of this had been a mistake. That she'd been hoping things had changed, that Penny had changed, but it was obvious she'd only gotten worse. She implied the accusations were all false, that everything Penny said her father did to her was a lie.

That everything Penny has always said has been a lie.

The moment she told Penny he wasn't even her real father, my little girl broke. I could see it.

Her mother's words were a hammer that kept pounding until cracks formed within Penny's composure.

When I caught sight of the tears, I wanted to jump up and confront the woman. I wanted to push her away from my girl, demand she apologizes, smite her down for what she was saying.

Penny did it for me, though. She did it for herself.

Turns out, dear mother demanded that if anyone was to apologize, it was Penny to her father. She was welcome to come home, alone, and beg for forgiveness. That was the only way, the only thing Penny would be able to do, if she wanted to continue a relationship.

What kind of ultimatum is that?

Who even does that?

Penny told her to go to hell.

She walked away, fist clenched at her side, tears in her eyes, but her shoulders were strong, her steps fast…my girl was breaking, but she wasn't going to let her mother know she'd been the one to do the damage.

I was proud of Penny.

I also made a vow.

Somehow, I'd find a way to make her mother pay.

CHAPTER TEN

ANDREA TO JACK

It's hard to watch your child fall apart.

It's even harder to watch and know there's nothing you can do to protect them while it happens.

Clyde was a mess. Even more so than Penny.

All he could think about was how to fix it.

There's really not much you can do other than listen.

Listen to the pain. To the dying dreams. To the whispered yearnings.

Listen and then offer suggestions, once they've been asked.

Here's the thing I figured out: it's a waste of breath to offer suggestions unless the other person is ready to hear them.

Penny, she needed to work through things on her own. She wasn't much of a talker. She'd get lost in her head, thinking through things, envisioning scenarios, rediscovering dreams. Once she had those things figured out, then she'd talk them over, needing counsel to see if she was on the right path or not.

I think, if she'd never gotten in touch with her mother, she would have been okay.

It was seeing that asshole in the diner that put us on a collision course with destiny.

That Christmas would have been like every other one since she ran from home, we would have made our own memories and welcomed in a new year.

Instead, she got lost in past memories and couldn't find a way out of

them.

She wasn't talking with me, Jack.

That was unsettling.

I kept waiting for her to be ready, but it was like her mother's words took root inside her soul, and that cancer grew and spread until it overpowered her.

She would share with us the different holiday traditions that she grew up with:

- *The movies she'd watch with her mom while sipping hot cocoa and eating popcorn.*
- *The cookies her mother would bake.*
- *The way they'd sing Christmas carols together.*

She kept asking me if we could bake cookies together.

We lived in a camper on top of a pickup truck. No, we couldn't bake it in that thing.

But we'd go to bakeries and buy their cookies.

It wasn't the same. I knew it wasn't the same.

I tried to convince my boss to let me use the kitchen in the back to bake some cookies, but he nixed that idea real quick.

Clyde and I, we both tried to make things special, but we were losing Penny, little by little, and we didn't know what to do.

By that point, we would have done anything to save her.

I guess, by that point, we did do everything, didn't we?

Did Clyde tell you about Christmas Eve?

Of course he did. There were probably a lot of gaps, weren't there?

How about I fill them in for you.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ANDREA

I worked late on Christmas Eve. My boss, he closed up the diner early, which was nice.

What was even nicer was that we had a lot of food left over from the Christmas special he had on the menu, and he let me bring some of it home.

Clyde was a happy man.

Penny, she pecked at the food. She said how on Christmas Eve she'd always spend the night in the kitchen with her mom, baking cookies and sipping hot cocoa.

That girl was lost in the past and if we didn't figure out something, she'd be lost to us forever. I was really worried, you know?

Clyde came up with the idea that we could drive through town and see if we could find a store still open that might have cookies. They wouldn't be homemade, but they'd be dunkable with a good cup of cocoa. That seemed to cheer Penny up.

The streets were empty. Shops were closed. We didn't find a single store open.

Clyde suggested we head back to our site, but I thought it would be nice to drive through town, looking at all the pretty lights and decorations people had on their lawns.

I wanted to create a nice memory out of a disappointing night.

I should have been the one driving, but Clyde sat at the wheel,

and somehow, we ended up on Penny's old street.

Did he do that on purpose? He swore he didn't, but I've always wondered.

Clyde has an evil side to him. He likes to push buttons. Or, he liked to.

Penny perked up and wanted him to pull over once she realized where we were.

Clyde said no.

I said no.

But she begged and Clyde's a pushover for that girl.

So, he pulled over right outside her house and we all stared.

The front lawn was covered in snowmen. Not real ones, but stupid, ugly fake ones that look ridiculous. And the lights, they were so bright, it was crazy.

Who decorated like that? Especially if there were no kids in the house?

The driveway had three parked cars.

I remember asking Penny if she knew whom they belonged to.

Her mom. Her dad and her uncle.

This was the first time she'd ever mentioned an uncle.

A ghost of a look covered her face when she stared at his car, which sent shivers up my spine.

What had this uncle done to her?

No. I didn't want to know. Considering he was related to the husband, my imagination ran wild.

While we sat there, Penny started to share with us some of her favorite memories.

Clyde made a comment about it sounded perfect, but perfect isn't what she lived.

She didn't say anything for a little bit. When I turned to look at her, she had tears streaming down her face.

She knew it wasn't perfect.

She told us about a tradition the man she called father, had started when she was just a little thing.

Clyde told you, didn't he?

There was a death sentence on that man, a death sentence I know Clyde wanted to enact.

He'd be right to.

Clyde made a comment about wanting to cut off the man's penis. I said I'd help.

Penny just said she wanted cookies.

I was worried about the girl. If you'd been there, you would have been worried too.

The things she had to endure. It wasn't right.

Her mind was fracturing, Jack, right in front of us. All she could focus on were those damn cookies her mom made.

I didn't understand the fixation, I really didn't. Cookies are cookies. Some are good, some are bad, but none taste good enough to erase horrible memories.

Unless your mind wanted them to.

Our brains, they are amazing organs. The doctors in the nursery talked about how our minds will create false memories in order to protect us from the hardship of the real ones. They say sometimes a wall will go up, so high and thick, that no matter what you do, you'll never be able to scale it or break it down, to reveal what's behind it.

Sometimes that's a good thing.

Right then, all Penny was focused on were those cookies. I saw it in her eyes. She'd forgotten about everything else.

Clyde and I, we were of one mind. The whole time Penny talked, we stared at each other, reading between the lines of what she couldn't say.

There was some movement in the window, someone stood there, staring out at us.

I stared back, and I swear I saw a smile appear on his face.

That asshole, he knew we were there. He even beckoned for us to come in.

We had two options. Drive away and leave town for good, go

someplace, any place to help heal our broken girl, or we do something about what happened to her.

I've never been much of a runner.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ANDREA

I asked Penny what she wanted to do.

She gave me this look like she didn't understand me.

So, I reworded my question and gave her options.

Would she like to sleep in her old bed again tonight? Make some new memories with Clyde and I? Make our own cookies, and hot cocoa, watch Christmas movies on the television and wake up to a brand-new life?

There was hope in her eyes, a sparkle that lasted for a brief second. Then reality hit.

She asked about her parents. About the ultimatum from her mother.

I told her not to worry about it. That Clyde and I would have a talk with them, and they'd be the ones to apologize to her, not the other way around.

It didn't take much convincing, truth be told.

Yes, I understood what was about to happen.

I understood more than Clyde, even.

The actions of tonight were going to change our lives, but not in the way they all thought.

Unlike the owner of the pickup, we couldn't kill the people inside that house and get away with it. We'd have to pay the price.

I was willing.

I know Clyde was too, even if he didn't understand completely

how things would change.

The goal was to protect Penny as best we could.

Penny's hand was on the door handle when she asked me if her mom would be apologizing too.

I promised her she would.

I'd made sure of it.

That's all it took for her to decide she wanted to be back home.

Time stood still for me. I'm not sure about Clyde or Penny, but for me it did.

Every decision flowed together into one solid outcome. I knew what was about to happen. It was destiny. I knew it and I was okay with it.

I knew we'd end up in a place like this.

I didn't know we'd all end up here together. That was a surprise.

But I knew there was no way we'd get away with what was about to happen.

I followed after Penny with only one purpose - to make sure she was protected, that nothing happened to her that she didn't want to happen, and that she was in control of every action, every decision.

Her mother's husband met us at the door.

He held it open only slightly, just wide enough for his body to block us from seeing anything inside, but the smells, they made my mouth water.

Fresh baked cookies. You could smell them, Jack.

On the way up the walkway, Penny was bouncing with joy. She asked us what our favorite cookies were. She loved the thumbprint ones. Clyde, he was a sucker for a good sugar cookie. Me, I love gingerbread men. Especially when they're all decorated with that white icing.

Penny promised our favorites would be on the kitchen table.

I told her it was okay if they weren't, that we would make our own. She seemed to like that idea.

I was so proud of Penny and how she stood tall in front of that man.

I won't call him her father. Rapist. Abuser. Tormentor. Asshole. Any other name works.

I remember the words he said to Penny.

I remember the horror on her face.

I remember Clyde charging in like a bull, never giving him a chance.

Did Clyde tell you what he asked Penny?

He didn't acknowledge Clyde or I. His attention was on Penny and Penny alone.

He unzipped his pants, pulled out his penis, and asked if she were here for his special gift.

Clyde told you about that, right? I won't be repeating what he'd do to her. I don't need to.

He condemned himself, as far as I'm concerned.

One second, Clyde was beside me.

The next second, Clyde had a knife in his hand.

The following second, that knife was buried deep in that man's dick, sorry for the language.

It all happened so fast. That element of surprise was all that was needed though.

With one slice, Clyde cut off his penis. With another, he took the man's balls too.

There was so much blood.

The guy was in shock. Of course he was. His whole manhood was just taken from him. But I don't think it was just the shock of the pain and blood loss, I think the shock came from how fast it all happened.

I know it caught me off guard.

For a lumbering ox, I've never seen Clyde move that fast in my life.

He then pushed the man aside, not carrying what happened, and bee-lined it for the kitchen.

Penny joined him.

I was the only one left behind, taking it all in.

I wanted to. I needed to. I had to be the one who understood exactly what happened. I'd be the one to answer to all of this, so I needed to be present.

Let's give the guy a name…we'll call him James.

James started yelling and screaming. He dropped to the floor, curled in a ball as best he could but he cursed us all.

Clyde had tossed the knife down on the floor on his way to the kitchen. I scooped it up before anyone else could and focused on the woman who ran down the stairs, screaming her husband's name.

Do I need to paint the scene for you?

It was chaotic.

James is screaming to call 9-1-1, she's screaming at the sight of all that blood and Clyde and Penny are in the kitchen, filling their mouths with cookies.

I'm the only calm one.

The mother stopped about halfway through the living room. I don't know what stopped her from coming to her husband's aid, the realization she'd soon be rid of him or the fact I held a knife in my hand.

Her words were jerky. She stumbled over them, wanting to know what was going on, what was happening, what I was doing, why I had the knife in my hand, why it was pointed at her.

So many questions. So many stupid, unnecessary questions.

Where were these questions when James was raping her daughter?

She didn't have any.

Well, actually she did. They were more like excuses though. She said it never happened, that the accusations were all lies. Why would Penny do this to her family?

I wanted her to shut up.

Penny was watching me. Watching us. Her hands were fisted at her side and I waved my hand at her, telling her to stay away, that I had this.

I told the woman to shut up.

She should believe her daughter, not call her a liar.

She should stand up for her daughter, not cast her away.

She should ask for forgiveness if she wanted to keep living.

That last one got her attention.

She didn't think I would do it.

She turned her back on me and started throwing out vile words toward her daughter.

I warned her to shut up.

I warned her, but she wouldn't listen to me.

So, I slit her throat to make her shut up.

It seemed to do the trick.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ANDREA TO JACK

Did you think I had it in me? To kill someone?

Guess that's a stupid question since I'm in here for doing exactly that.

I wasn't sure how Penny would react to me killing her mother.

I figured she'd turn on me. Hate me. Want nothing to do with me.

I would have deserved it.

I did deserve it. I took her mother away from her.

But she didn't.

Surprised me too.

She grabbed a cookie and handed it to me.

It was a gingerbread cookie. My favorite.

Her uncle appeared from downstairs and you could tell he didn't know what to do.

Clyde went to stand between him and Penny, as if to protect her, but she pushed him out of the way. Said she had this. Said that seeing us protect her gave her the confidence to protect herself.

Said that we were all in this together.

I don't know if she'll tell you about him. I'm not sure if she'll be able to. She's never spoken about him since then, so maybe I'll give you the cliff notes.

His name was Ed. Short for Edward, maybe? Eddie. Edgar? It doesn't matter.

She took the knife from my hand and ran toward him, slashing at his

face, then his arms as they were raised to protect himself. That's when she lowered her aim and got him in the throat, with an upward thrust.

My girl. Taking care of it.

He staggered back, that knife in his throat. Eventually, he fell, tangling up with Penny's mother.

Overall, it didn't take too long.

Clyde went and cut off his penis and balls too, left them lying there beside him.

We went into the kitchen, washed up and then made some memories.

It's those memories that kept Penny together, like glue along the cracks. She broke, I won't deny that, but she could have broken apart completely if we hadn't stepped in to save her.

We made cookies. We drank hot cocoa. We turned on the television and watched the good old Christmas movies. Then we fell asleep up in Penny's room.

Yes, we all slept in her bed. Penny sandwiched between us. It was a tight fit, but I think that's the best she'd ever slept from the time I met her until now.

She felt safe. That's all I cared about. That was my only goal.

Don't ask her too much about it, okay, Jack? Let her tell you what she wants, what she can, but don't you ask questions that could hurt her.

That girl, she's ready to go. We all said we'd go together, and look at us, one by one, that's what we're doing.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JACK

Andrea didn't die as quick as Clyde.

She closed her eyes and slowly fell asleep.

She looked fairly peaceful while sleeping.

Here's what I think about Andrea: she wasn't perfect, but she did the best she could to love and protect a girl that most everyone else would have left alone.

Do I blame her for what she did? Do I blame Clyde?

Fuck no.

Do you?

GINGERBREAD COOKIE RECIPE

Andrea's favorite type of cookie. She must have a thing for destroying men…I bet she eats the head first.

(Note: these make big and fat gingerbread men. Perfect for dunking in coffee.)

GINGERBREAD Ingredients:

1 cup sugar
1 cup shortening (or butter)
1 cup molasses
1 cup sour milk (add 1 tbsp vinegar to milk, stir)
3 tsp baking soda
1 egg
1 tsp vinegar
1 tsp cinnamon, cloves and ginger
1/2 tsp nutmeg
1/2 tsp salt
4-5 cups flour

GINGERBREAD Instructions:

1. Use a large bowl and cream shortening and sugar
2. Add molasses and egg, mix well till creamy
3. Add 2 tsp of soda to the sour milk
4. Add 1 tsp of soda to 1 tbsp of vinegar
5. Add milk, vinegar, spices and salt to the molasses and egg

mixture

6. Fold in the flour
7. Chill the batter for 1 hr (can be left overnight)
8. Remove dough and preheat oven to 350 F
9. Roll dough between 2 pcs of lightly floured parchment
10. Cut into shapes (gingerbread men…hello) and move each cookie to the parchment lined cookie sheet
11. Bake for 15-18 min (bottoms need to be light brown and cookies look puffy)

TIPS: for really big, fat gingerbread men (is there any other way to make these?) leave the dough about 1/2 inch thick and bake for 18-20 min.

Ice the cookies if you wish. Simple icing would work - mixture of icing sugar and butter (3 cups of icing sugar to 1 cup of soft butter).

PATIENT PENNY

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Thank you to Jen Brooks with the name help for Penny's uncle.

Thank you to MaryAnn Baum for naming Penny.

Birdie Bleu is a special character and I appreciate Amy Keifer's support with the Kickstarter.

Amy, naming this little girl Birdie Bleu was more perfect than you can imagine. I will never tell you why, but between you and me (and everyone else reading this), this was the only name she could have.

CHAPTER ONE

JACK

This next one is a little different than what you can imagine.

Penny is here. She's awake. She's aware. She's wanting to have a chat.

I haven't moved from my seat since saying goodbye to Andrea.

Have you clued in to things yet?

The patient in front of me is broken. Her mind is splintered into a million different pieces and she's only been able to survive by embracing that brokenness as best she could.

You've heard the term multiple personalities, right? Dissociative identity disorder?

That's the woman in front of me.

We've met two of her alters - alternate personalities.

We're about to meet another.

I'll be honest with you, I don't know how many alters she has.

I have met the host, and hopefully I can say goodbye to her before all of this is done.

Does any of that make sense to you?

This next confession isn't really a confession, more like a conversation. I'll share a little, only to help finalize the stories you're already heard. This girl doesn't need to admit to anything. I don't need her confession. Clyde and Andrea have already given all that information.

Really, I'm not even sure why I'm adding this next bit in. Guess you can consider it a Christmas present.

CHAPTER TWO

JACK

Ike is at the door, and he's wearing a bright green elf hat.

"Hey ya, Penny. It's been a bit. I've brought you a nice warm blanket," he says as he steps into the room and replaces the room-temperature blankets with a fresh one.

"Oh, that's nice and cozy," Penny says, giving a little shiver as the heat hits her.

"I like your hat, Ike." She smiles up at him.

He takes off the hat and places it on her head. "Now it's yours."

Her hand trembles as she pats the hat. "How do I look, Jack? All festive and shit?"

I've chatted with Penny maybe a handful of times. Ike has more of a relationship with her than I do. I'm always caught a little off guard though, when she swears at me.

She sounds innocent. Like a cute kid, you know? I try to picture her how she sees herself, dressed in all goth, tough, and shit, but…

You have to be here, to hear her, to understand what I'm trying to say.

"You look like shit, Pen. Green isn't your color."

Her brows lift and wiggle. "I'll trade ya," she offers.

I'm about to jerk the hat off my head, but Ike pushes my hand away.

Fucktard.

"He's not allowed, Penny. He lost a bet and has to wear it. I

think it suits him, what do you think?"

She laughs, something that sounds like a cross between a giggle and a smirk, and the more I scowl, the more she chuckles.

"I like it."

"Hey, Penny. I wrote a song for you. Want me to sing it?"

I turn toward Ike and give him a what-the-fuck look. He didn't tell me he had a song for her. Not that I mind, and I should have known he would. I mean, of all patients, he'd have a song for Penny.

It better not sound like the others though. I feel a need to protect this girl.

Ike pulls out a sheet and briefly shows it to me. I scan it, and there's no mention of blood, death or anything remotely morbid.

Good. Otherwise, I'd beat his ass.

I raise my hands, as if to cover my ears, which has Penny laughing again.

"Is he really that bad?"

I give a slight shrug. "You might want to be prepared, just in case."

Ike pretends he's offended. "My wife says I sound like a canary, I'll have you know."

"Is she deaf?" Penny asks.

I snort. I can't help it. Wonder if she's actually heard him sing?

Deck the halls with sugar and stockings,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Sing the songs and watch the cartoons,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Zip up the jacket, wear the homemade scarf,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la
Don't burn the cookies and tarts,
Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la.

Penny's grin was ear to ear, and her head bobbed back and forth as

he sang.

“You know that didn’t rhyme, right?” There’s a twinkle in her eyes that make me wish he’d sung longer.

What a sap I am.

“All I care about is the smile on your face,” Ike says.

Penny turns to me, and I have a feeling I’m not about to like what she’s about to say.

“Have you been a good boy this year, Jack? Did you decorate your house like you’d promised me you would?”

Shit. Double shit. I totally forgot.

Last year on Christmas Eve, I’d gone down to the nursery for a few hours and spent time with the girls. Penny had been sitting at a table decorating sugar cookies and somehow convinced me to join her. We talked about the best kind of cookies, the best way to decorate a tree, and then I confessed that I really wasn’t a Christmas type of person.

She’d been horrified. She couldn’t understand how people would actively choose not to like Christmas. I reminded her that not everyone had good memories of the holiday.

Then you make some, she’d said.

She was right.

“What kind of memory would you like to make this year?” I ask, completely sidestepping the whole did I decorate question.

She looks around the room she’s in, notices the equipment she’s hooked up to and the look on her face says it all.

“Well, this will be the first time I don’t wake up on Christmas Day, so I guess that’s a new thing, right?”

She says it nonchalantly like dying isn’t a thing to be upset about.

“There is that,” Ike says.

“I feel a little sad, to be honest,” she says. “Saying goodbye to Clyde and Andrea was hard. We all had a little cry together. I hope I’ll see them again. I should, right?”

I lean over and place my hand on hers. “I hope you do, Penny.”

“Did you have a good chat with them?” She perks up a little when I smile at her.

“Did Clyde tell you about the Christmas he ate all the sugar cookies? Like, I mean all of them Jack. In one sitting. He didn’t even leave the crumbs behind.”

“Sounds like Clyde.”

She nods.

“I guess, if I have to die, this is when I would want to go, you know? Not after Christmas when everyone gets sad and blue, and your bones never feel like they’ll warm up again. I’d rather die happy, listen to Christmas carols, and see the lights twinkle at night. This is my happy time, the only time I’m really happy. You know that, right?”

“I know, Pen.”

She doesn’t come out much. You’ll see her more during the holidays, for sure, but when it comes to the rest of the year, she doesn’t appear as often as you’d think. She makes an appearance during group sessions and personal therapy, but for the most part, she lets the others be more present.

This past year, the host, she’s been more chatty than the others.

I wonder if it’s because she knew she didn’t have much longer to live.

“How is Birdie?” Ike asks.

Penny’s smile turns sad. “She doesn’t like this time of year, Ike. You know that.”

Ike lounges by the wall, and I guess he’s not going anywhere. Not that I care. He has every right to be here.

“Did anyone tell you how Birdie and I first met?” Penny looks to me, then Ike, then back to me.

Both of us shake our heads. Alters normally just appear, are present, like they’ve always been there, maybe in the background, waiting for their time. I assumed that’s how it was for Birdie and Penny. We’ve already heard how Clyde and Andrea came to be. Clyde was there when Penny needed help, and Andrea appeared

when Clyde was sick, and Penny was alone.

“When Birdie Bleu was eight years old, her parents went away on vacation but didn’t take her. Uncle Ed came to the house for a long weekend to watch her. He promised they’d have fun all weekend, that they’d play games, watch movies and go to McDonald’s every day.”

She pauses for a moment, and Ike pipes up, “did they get McD’s, at least?”

She nods. “Every day. A cheeseburger happy meal. He did that to stop her from crying.”

My hand’s fist at the words she didn’t say.

Ike swears.

“Yeah, Ed was an asshole, but he was nicer than James. He just made Birdie suck him off, that’s as far as he went. James…James is in hell for what he did to her.” Her voice quietens, and she stares down at her hands that worry the blanket on her lap.

“It was too much for her, though, so I came along and told her she’d never get hurt again. I made sure of that. We created a room for her, a place where she can be happy all the time, with dolls and games, and books. Lots of picture books. It’s where she goes during the holidays too. She’s sleeping right now, curled up tight with her favorite teddy bear. She won’t wake up, Jack, in case you thought she might.”

I kind of figured that. I wasn’t sure if we’d get a chance to say goodbye, but I’m okay if she stays asleep.

“Are you in pain, Penny?”

“Want me to top her up?” Ike asks this of me as I glance over at her bag of fluids.

Penny sighs. There’s a hitch in her breath as she exhales, and I wonder if she’s close to the end.

“I’m ready to sleep, Jack if that’s all right with you? My body hurts all over, a dull groan of pain, if that makes sense?”

Penny closed her eyes for good not even ten minutes later.

Ike and I walk down the hallway together, both of us quiet until we come to the nurses' station.

Sometimes, there's nothing to say on nights like this.

Sometimes, nothing to say is the only thing to say.

THUMBPRINT COOKIES

Penny's favorite cookie - she liked them with jam in the center. You could do a piece of chocolate if you wanted.

THUMBPRINT Ingredients:

1 cup unsalted butter (soft)
1/3 cup sugar
1/3 cup brown sugar
1 egg yolk
3/4 tsp vanilla extract
2 1/4 cup flour
2 tsp cornstarch
1/2 tsp salt
1/3 jam

THUMBPRINT Instructions:

1. Place butter in the bowl and beat until creamy
2. Add sugars and beat until well combined
3. Add egg yolk and vanilla extract. Mix well
4. In a separate bowl, whisk together flour, cornstarch, and salt
5. Add flour and mix until the dough seems dry and crumbly
6. Scoop cookie dough into balls and roll then place on parchment lined sheet
7. Use your thumb (wash them first) to man an indent in the center of the ball
8. Chill for 30 minutes

9. Preheat oven to 375F

10. Place jam in a small microwave-safe bowl. Heat briefly (about 5-10 seconds) and stir

11. Spoon jam into each thumbprint, filling each indent to the brim.

12. Bake for 11 minutes or until edges are just beginning to turn golden brown.

TIPS:

If you don't want to use jam, just use a Hershey Kiss and press it down into the dough before cooking.

CANDY CANE SHORTBREAD COOKIES

These are Birdie Bleu's favorite cookie. It's probably most kids favorite when you think about it.

CANDY CANE SHORTBREAD Ingredients:

1/2 tsp salt
1/2 tsp baking powder
2 1/2 cups flour
1 cup butter (soft)
1 cup sugar
1 egg
2 tsp almond extract
1 tsp vanilla extract
1/2 tsp red food coloring
1/4 cup sugar

CANDY CANE SHORTBREAD Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees
2. In a medium bowl, whisk baking powder, salt and flour
3. In a separate bowl, combine the butter and sugar until light and fluffy
4. Add the egg, almond extract, vanilla, and salt. Mix well
5. Slowly add the flour in small amounts, beating until just combined
6. Divide the dough into 2. Add red food coloring to one ball until it's bright red

7. Cover the dough with a damp kitchen towel to keep it from drying out as you work (you may need to chill it)

8. Pinch off pieces from each dough ball, roll them into 4-inch ropes on a lightly floured surface. Place them side by side (one red and one white), press together lightly and then twist into a spiral. Make a hook so it resembles a candy cane.

9. Place them on a cookie sheet. Sprinkle with the remaining sugar if you like

10. Bake about 8 minutes.

PATIENT BECCA

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Thanks to the following people in my Patreon for helping to name the people in this next confession:

Dominique Aragon, Lauren Wysner, Emily Durham and Kristy Ann.

CHAPTER ONE

This one is kind of personal to me.

If you've ever worked in the healthcare system - as a nurse, doctor, in the kitchen, clean the floors, security, volunteer…doesn't really matter - then this might be a little personal for you too.

Holidays, as we all know, aren't always the happy feeling, jolly and merry shit you see portrayed on commercials or those ridiculous small-town romance movies. Holidays can be downright depressing, difficult, and demoralizing for many folks.

I can't tell you how many patients I've lost around the holidays, how many families are in mourning, and the grief that drowns those left behind.

Some people are able to wait out the days, counting down the hours till the damn radio stops playing Christmas music and all those blinking lights are turned off for good.

For some people…each day is too much, and they count the hours, and the minutes and sometimes can't even wait out the seconds.

This next patient, her confession is always lingering at the back of my mind.

I almost didn't add it to this book. In fact, it's a last-minute addition. She didn't die during the holidays, and she sure as hell doesn't get a song from Ike, but the reason she's in here is why she's in this book.

It's because of her I never sample any homemade goods a family member would bring to the hospital.

Here, at the Asylum, it never happens. It's against the rules. But at the hospitals I'd worked at, you'd see it all the time. I heard about this woman, she's a legend in our area, and it's because of her I never touched food someone else brought in.

After listening to Chef - who was back in book 1, I'll never eat the food at funerals either. Not ever.

CHAPTER TWO

JACK

It's been a hell of a shift, and I'm more than ready to head home when my phone rings.

It's the Fucking Warden with a request I stay late.

Hell no, man. There's a wrestling match I want to catch, along with a lot of zzzs, if you get my drift.

"The nurse killer is on her way. I'd see it as a personal favor if you stayed and had a little chat with her."

I lean back in my chair and groan at the crack-crack-crack of my spine as I stretch.

"She's never been on my list, Warden. You know that." In fact, I've made it very clear to him that I have never wanted to talk to her. She's called a nurse killer for a reason.

"Just like you know, she's always been on mine. She's local, and this is personal for me."

Personal for him? Like fuck it is.

Sure, she's local. As in, within the state local, I get that there's this innate interest even if most people have forgotten about her. But personal? I don't buy that.

I don't say it, though. I know better.

"Do you know why she's here, at this place, and not a regular prison?"

This is where I'm supposed to act like I care, but I don't.

So, I stay silent.

“She’s my ex-wife’s childhood friend.”

Well fuck. That changes things.

“Didn’t think you and your ex got along?” In the time I’ve known him, all he’s done is complain about her, how she causes more issues than helps to solve them.

“We don’t. But it’s a promise I made a long time ago, and if I don’t keep it, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

It’s there, in his voice, and I know there’s no sense arguing. He’s not going to budge, not on this.

“If you want her death to be fast, I can do that. I don’t want to talk to her, though.” I don’t like doing this, in fact, it’s something I’m dead set against doing, but I really don’t want to talk to Becca.

“No. I need that confession.”

“Why?”

He’s quiet for the longest time, and I’m regretting the question.

“I need to make sure my wife wasn’t involved in what she did, okay, is that fair?”

I snort with disbelief. “So then I won’t talk to the woman, and you’ll have your answer.”

“Damn it, Jack. I need to know. Don’t prod. Don’t ask her outright, but if she mentions my wife at all, I need to know. I’ve done everything I could to protect her, but…”

This is turning into a soap opera if you ask me.

“I’ve only ever talked to Becca once. When she was first brought in. I made it clear she was here because of me, that she was going to be forgotten about, wiped from this state’s memory, and you know what she told me?”

Let me guess…it has something to do with his wife? I rub my hand across my face and realize whether I want to or not, I’m staying late.

“She knew I brought her here to protect my ex. She warned me if I made things unpleasant for her here, I’d regret it.”

“You didn’t fucking believe her, did you?” He can’t be that stupid.

“Just talk to her, damn it. Just fucking talk to her. And make it quick.” The dial tone loud against my ear confirms he hung up on me.

Ike knocks on my office door and pops his head in. “Shift is almost done. Meet you at the pub?”

I shake my head. “I’ll be here awhile yet.”

“Why?”

We both hear the elevator door chime and one of the guards calling out.

Ike waits for me to let him in on why I won’t be joining him.

“The fucking nurse-killer is here, and Warden wants me to have a chat with her.”

Ike gives off a string of curse words. He doesn’t like her either.

“Thought she was in solitary? Why the fuck bring her here? Just get it over with down there.”

I shrug. “She could have gone in her sleep and saved us the trouble, but she’s never been one to be considerate of others in our profession, has she?”

The guard calls out again, and Ike leaves me to go deal with her.

There’s enough time that he’ll get her situated in her room before I have to join her.

Fuck.

CHAPTER THREE

JACK

Becca is strapped in tight in her bed, leg cuffs not giving an inch, same with her hands.

The woman is nasty. Or, was, I guess. She doesn't look like she could lift a finger or toe right now if she wanted to.

Maybe all of this will be for nothing, and she'll die before I can even sit down.

Wouldn't that be nice?

I'd love to tell Warden I tried.

The look she gives me could turn a widow spider into lava, and it takes everything in me not to turn around and leave her there to die.

Fuck.

"What the fuck do you want?" Her voice is hoarse, and I'm sure her throat is dry as a desert. There's a tray with some water, and a cup with a straw off to the side, so I do the nice thing, the nurse thing, and let her have a few sips.

"I'm here to make sure things are okay and see if you're up for a chat." It's a struggle not to let in the contempt I feel for this woman.

She laughs, and I'm shocked at the sound.

She's got a soft voice. A voice that seems almost kind.

Almost.

"Do I look okay?" She glances down toward her tethered hands. She tries to lift them but is barely able. "My body is shutting down,

I'm weak as a newborn kitten, and if I'm seeing you, then I'm about to die, aren't I?

I shrug.

"You're dying whether you see me or not," I say.

She leans her head back against her pillow. "True enough," she says. "Sure, if you want to chat, that's fine. It's been a while since I've had someone to talk to."

I stop myself from saying anything, I just give her a nod. "I'll be back in a bit. Don't go anywhere."

I can hear her chuckling behind me as I leave her room.

Fuck.

I'd been kind of hoping she'd tell me to fuck off, and that would be that.

This really isn't my day, is it?

I head back to my office. Since it's a shift change, things are a little busy, so I take my time. Not much is happening on the floor, we've got a few patients filling beds but nothing the day shift can't handle.

I have a chat with the charge nurse and give her a heads up I'll be sitting with Becca, and I can tell from her sigh of relief she's glad it's me and not her.

"I'll let you know when she's gone," I say as I take my chair and push it out of the office.

I've refilled my mug with hot coffee, got my notebook and pen, and with slow, heavy steps, I make my way to Becca's room.

There's a different vibe on the floor following a shift change. This crew is more lively, and upbeat, chatting and joking around with each other.

Not to say, my shift, we don't chat and joke. But we also appreciate the night, the dark, quiet evenings that are full of groans and screams and the occasional cursing as patients are tended to.

We're a rougher shift. I like it that way.

My shoulders are heavy, and my feet are like cement as I push my chair into Becca's room. I set it off to the side, angled toward

the woman, but not too close. I don't want her thinking I'm here because I want to be.

I take a good hot sip of my coffee before placing it on the floor.

"What's that?" She asks.

"Coffee." I grab it and bring it to my lips, making a show of taking another sip. I hold it and notice how she's eyeing it like it's the holy grail or something.

"God, I'd give anything for a sip of that shit. It's the good stuff, isn't it? Not the sludge they give us downstairs, right?"

I take another sip. I'm the devil, I know.

"Yeah, it's pretty good. I bring my own grounds in."

She licks her lips, and I ignore the silent plea in her gaze.

Fuck no, I'm not sharing my coffee with her. I'm not even going to let her have a sniff of it. I'm an asshole, and I don't bother to hide that fact.

"So, this is it, huh? That famous chat we're going to have. I hear the rumors, you know, the offers you've given to some people and not to others. Some folks are right pissed at you because you're so selective. Bet no one thought you'd be here, offering me a deal of my own."

Her eyes light up a little as she speaks.

I heave a long sigh, bring one leg up and rest it over the other and open my notebook.

"Here's what's going to happen," I say, my voice cold and low. "We'll chat, you make it interesting, and I'll make sure you fall asleep for good, rather than dealing with the day shift crap and be in pain. Got it?"

She nods, giving a glance toward the machines beside her.

"You in pain now?"

She rolls her eyes.

"Then make the chat a good one, and I'll get rid of the pain for you." If I give her any now, she'll fall asleep, and that's not what I want.

What I want is to get out of here. Watch the game. Have a few

beers. Sleep like the dead.

What I do not want is to be here, in this room with her.

I think I've made that crystal clear, don't you?

CHAPTER FOUR

BECCA TO JACK

You could be a little friendly, you know? Do you know how long I've been in this god-forsaken place? Too long.

Do you know how many friendly faces I've seen since coming in here?

Not many.

The Warden is a dick and keeps me locked away. He's claimed some bullshit lies that I'm not to be trusted, that I'm not safe, that I'm a danger to myself and to the staff at this place.

I'm not a danger to anyone.

Well, maybe to him. It would explain why he's so scared of me.

Did you know that? He and I, we have a history. A past that binds us. He can't get rid of me even if he wanted to.

Okay, fine, it's not like I know him personally. But his wife.

His wife and I were besties once upon a time, did you know that?

Yeah, you did. I see it in your face. You're not shocked at all.

I haven't talked to her in years. Not since before I came in here. Guess our bestie friendship was a bust, wasn't it?

I've been here a long time, Jack. In that time, I've learned a few things. Interested in hearing them?

1. Life doesn't care about who you are or what you've gone through.

2. Fate plays favorites.

3. Silence really is a gift.

I've been on my own, by my own, for longer than I was out in the

world, you know? I've had time to take a good long look at myself, and I'll be happy when I can stop looking.

Whatever happens after death has to be better than the life I've lived.

CHAPTER FIVE

BECCA

I used to have a life. I was a kindergarten teacher, imagine that.

I was happy. Satisfied. It's all I'd ever wanted to do, be a teacher.

Well, that's a lie. I wanted to be a teacher, get married, and have my own children to love.

And I did. I lived that life. I was happy. I taught the most adorable and exhausting children, found the man of my dreams, and we even had a child.

My happily-ever-after came true.

That's when I should have known something was wrong. Life isn't a fairytale, even though I used to read them to my students.

Life is more of a horror story, one we live in every day, and it only ever gets worse.

Ahh, that's more your speed, isn't it, Jack? Figures you're a horror nut.

I wasn't, and I'm still not. Give me a good happily-ever-after, even if I've stopped believing in them.

Did you know I'd always get a stack of books brought to my room each week? No note. No hint as to who sent them. I know it wasn't anyone here. Always figured it was the Warden's wife, you know? I'd like to think it was her, even after all this time.

Every Monday, I'd get a stack of books, and the old stack would be taken away. I had my own personal librarian, how fun is that?

Chey and I, we used to spend hours in the library as kids. In school, we'd eat our lunch as fast as we could and then rush to the library. We'd grab a book off the shelf, plop in a corner and read until it was time for class. We did that every day. On the weekends, we'd go to the town library and sign out at least four books a week.

That was our life, and it was a good one. Nose stuck in a book and all that. Nothing wrong with reading at all. I've been to more places than you could imagine, all thanks to a good book.

Chey and I, we dreamed about traveling to far-off places, finding husbands who would take care of us, and raising our kids together. I wanted to be a teacher. She wanted to be a nurse. I followed my dream, and her's changed, somewhat. She didn't end up a nurse. She met her husband and became a trophy wife.

Even though our lives changed, we stayed close friends.

Eventually, I didn't click with her new social circle, but that's to be expected, right? Not like she got all high and mighty or anything. Little by little, she'd start canceling plans with me, but I never caught on, never thought twice about it. I mean, why would I? We'd been childhood friends. Nothing would come between us, right?

There was one thing we continued to share, and that was a love for books.

She started a book club through the library, and I joined. Originally, we were supposed to run it together, but…well, she brought in other friends who came and went, and I was relegated to the corner.

No, that's wrong. That's not what happened. It just felt that way.

We did start it together. We selected the first few books together. But little by little, people saw her more as the leader, and I became the wallflower. It was a natural thing to happen. It's not fair of me to blame her.

We started off reading a lot of romance books, but eventually, people in the group wanted other types of books. We went more literary for a bit, but those were boring. We tried fantasy when it

was popular for a bit, but that too ran its course.

Oh, I'm boring you? I see that yawn. Is there something else you want to hear?

You want to know why I did what I did, right? I'm leading into that. If this is the last conversation, I'm going to have with someone, then let me ramble if you don't mind. Besides, it's important.

If you want to know how I figured out how to pull off the perfect murder, then you'll erase that frown from your face.

CHAPTER SIX

BECCA TO JACK

People come and go in your life. That's not always a bad thing.

Sometimes they leave for a long while, but eventually, they all come back. One way or another.

Like with Chey. We lost touch, and that was okay.

I dropped out of the book club. One excuse after another led to an easy withdrawal from her life.

It was hard. I was sad. But it was for the best.

Even Michael said so. My husband never really liked Chey, or her husband.

We tried to do the couple thing a few times, but it was awkward, and felt flat each time. You can't force men to be friends, just because you want them to be.

Neither one of us really confronted things, we just let the friendship run its course until it hit the end of the line.

I went on with my life. She went on with hers.

I kept teaching and playing house. It was nice. I had my Prince Charming, you know?

Michael was a teacher too. We worked all week, and then we get in the car and hit the road on Saturday. The goal was to get away, anywhere. We'd go antique shopping, or go for ice cream, or find a trail to hike or…just whatever.

Sundays were spent getting ready for the week. Saturdays were for us.

We were young. Innocent. Naive. In love. All around good people.

What? You don't believe me?

People are born good, Jack. They learn to become evil. It's not an instantaneous decision either. For most people, it's a gradual occurrence that most aren't even aware of.

You know that, right? You have to. From what you do here, all the stories you've heard, the things people have confided, they weren't always bad seeds.

I wasn't either.

I'm still not.

I just happen to have a thing about doctors and nurses, no offense.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BECCA

When I first met Michael, it was love at first sight, for both of us.

We both wanted children, the sooner the better, but luck wasn't on our side.

It took us three years to conceive, only to lose that baby due to a miscarriage.

In total, I had three miscarriages in a row.

Do you have any idea the toll that takes on a woman? Not just her body but her mind? Her spirit?

I would have broken a long time ago if it weren't for Michael. He was my rock. My protector.

He was the one who suggested we stop, that we give my body a break. I didn't want to, but he was right.

I have three angel babies I was never able to meet, too young, and too weak to survive in my womb.

My womb was a tomb, the tomb was me.

I was death to my babies, and I couldn't handle that.

After the last one, Michael took me on a holiday. We went down to the Keys, sat on a beach, drinking Pina Coladas, and ate key lime everything.

I hate the taste now. Even the hint of a scent of key lime has me gagging.

It was down there, that I became pregnant again. When I found out, I kept it from Michael. The miscarriages had been just as hard

on him as they were on me. Together, we were partners with the pain.

I couldn't hide it for long. He knew me and my body as well as I did.

He tried to be happy, and excited, we both did, but…we were cautious too.

By month four, we started to let ourselves dream, dream of what it would be like to hold our baby, to actually be parents.

My doctor advised me to go on bed rest, and believe me when I say I had no problem taking his advice. If lying in bed for the rest of my pregnancy is what it took to bring that baby to term, then I would lay in that bed and not even move.

It was hard. Bed rest isn't natural for women, we want to get up and go, we need to be doing something, anything, to get through the day.

I was thirty-four weeks pregnant when the contractions came.

Thirty-four weeks when I gave birth to my beautiful baby girl. We named her Angelina because she was our angel sent from heaven.

She was beautiful. She had all ten fingers and toes, a cute little round nose, and she was alive.

She wasn't well. But she was alive.

They whisked her away the moment she was born. Said she was too early, too frail.

I had to believe they lied. She wasn't frail, she was strong. Strong enough to survive my death womb, strong enough to survive birth too.

She stayed in the hospital for a total of four weeks before they'd let us bring her home. During those four weeks, I would stay at her side, constant vigil, reading her stories, singing her songs, and being present so that she wouldn't be alone.

Michael would come when he could, but it was mainly me, on my own.

The doctors and nurses there, they were kind. Or so I thought at

the time.

They were encouraging. Supportive. Friendly and showed so much attention to Angelina. The nurses all gave me a gift for her when we left, a really cute outfit with knitted booties and hat.

I thought life would be perfect once we were home.

I held my daughter in my arms.

I watched over as she slept in the bassinet beside the bed.

We had a lot of visitors, people who wanted to love our little girl as much as we did.

Chey even came. She brought me a beautiful basket full of clothes and items for our baby girl and even bought me some books to read, parenting books on newborns, and then a few for my own pleasure, not that I had much time to read.

Babies, as wonderful as they are, are also exhausting.

Angelina didn't cry a lot, though I wish she would have. It might have made things easier.

She wouldn't eat, not from the breast or a bottle.

She slept a lot.

I knew something was wrong, but every time I took her to our doctor, he said she was fine. Babies tended to sleep, and while she was a little underweight, it was all in my head.

He seemed more concerned about me than Angelina.

I wasn't the problem. Sure, I was tired, but who wouldn't be when they had a new baby?

Days turned into weeks, and my concerns for my daughter didn't change.

Michael thought I was being too overprotective and so he had my mother come and stay with us, just to give me a break.

It was nice having my mom there. She calmed me, for sure, but eventually, she started to notice that things just weren't right with Angelina too.

I took her to the doctor almost every week for that first month or so she was home.

When the doctor would do nothing, I wanted to take her to the

emergency, to have someone at the hospital look at her. Surely there they'd realize it wasn't all in my head, right?

CHAPTER EIGHT

BECCA

It wasn't all in my head. I knew that then, and I know it now.

We all know it now.

But back then, I couldn't get anyone to listen to me.

I can't tell you how frustrating that is. As a mother, knowing there is nothing you can do for your child even though you know something is wrong…it's demoralizing.

For a while, I started to believe them, that the issue was me.

Me and my death womb. I probably shouldn't have said that out loud so often. People looked at me weirdly, and by people, I mean nurses and doctors.

Sure, you're here to help people, but you think you know it all.

You don't.

Don't look at me like that. You're not God. You're not these all-powerful beings who know everything. You only know what you were taught and what you learn along the way.

Sure, as a profession, you know more now than back then, but still.

You. Are. Not. Perfect.

Get rid of your fucking god complex, please. Even now, you have one.

Sorry to be the one to break the news, if you haven't figured it out yet.

I used to be so thankful for the people in your profession, but when you stopped believing me, when the blame was placed on me rather than

their own incompetence, I started to get angry.

Anyone in my shoes would.

Anyone who knows in their gut that something is wrong, with them, but no one will believe them, they would understand. How many people do you think knew they had cancer before their doctor would run tests?

Everyone started looking at me funny. The doctors. The nurses. My husband. My mother. Everyone.

I started to wonder if I really was the problem. If I was the one making my daughter sick, because I knew she was.

I stopped breastfeeding because I thought my milk was the issue.

Then I made my mom and Michael get her bottles ready because maybe I was doing something wrong.

Maybe I wasn't washing the bottles properly. Maybe it was the laundry soap. Maybe I wasn't washing her enough or maybe it was too much. Maybe it was the sheets in her bassinet….the idea that I was the issue consumed me, and that's a scary place to live, Jack.

It's like living a nightmare that won't ever end.

CHAPTER NINE

BECCA

I overheard my mother and husband talking one night, both concerned for my mental well-being.

I know today it's fine to say you're mentally unwell, that it's normal or something, but that's only been a recent development.

For years, decades, someone showing any type of mental health breakdown were sent away, to be forgotten about - like this place.

My husband didn't want to do that to me.

My mother, she's a real bitch.

She convinced Michael to talk to the doctor about what to do. They tried putting me on medication, they suggested taking me on a holiday to get away…all things that we did but didn't change the situation.

My daughter wasn't well.

Everyone said she was just a tiny thing, not much muscle, she'd always be skinny, and I was making it to be more of an issue than it was.

A mother knows, though.

A mother always knows.

It was while we were on this holiday to the coast, where we sat on the beach, built sandcastles, and soaked in the sun, that Angelina got a cold.

Tell me a new mom who doesn't freak out when her child has a cold?

They can't breathe. They choke on their coughs. They won't eat. They won't sleep. They fuss all the time.

I was told it was a normal thing and we'd be fine.

I read all the books and took all the advice.

Eventually, the cold went away, but my fear didn't. I swore my daughter was worse. She slept all the time now and started small mewing sounds in her sleep. She rarely cried, but I knew she was in pain.

When people suspect you're crazy, nothing you do can change their opinion. Once crazy, always crazy, even if you're not.

My doctor started rolling his eyes when he walked into the exam room.

The office nurses talked about me behind my back.

Their incompetence didn't stop me. I changed doctors. I went to three different doctors, and they all said the same thing.

Angelina was fine.

I knew they were lying, but I didn't know how to prove it.

In the end, it didn't matter anyway.

CHAPTER TEN

BECCA

It was two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon when it happened.

Angelina struggled for breath, and nothing I did made even the slightest difference. I was trying not to panic, but I couldn't help it. I knew something was dreadfully wrong.

I made my mom drive us to the hospital.

For the first time, someone finally listened to me.

They finally admitted her.

Finally. After over a year of me telling them something was wrong with my daughter, a daughter who could barely walk, who slept most of the day away, who rarely cried but grimaced and groaned in her sleep…they finally admitted, that, yes, something was wrong with her.

They were too late, though.

She died in that hospital. Died in a cold, sterile room.

She wasn't alone. Thank God. I was there, holding her, singing to her as she took her last breath.

I didn't realize she'd died. I rocked her in the chair, singing lullabies, my head tilted back, eyes closed as my heart whispered prayers…

I should have been looking down at her.

Was she looking at me when she died?

Was she waiting for me to notice her? To comfort her? To tell her I loved her?

I'll never know.

Guilt and regret are two similar diseases. They both eat at you, tear you apart, make you wish for something more, all the while leaving you with the bitter taste of knowing there's nothing you can do.

I feel guilty for not demanding someone listen to me sooner, for not doing more to protect my daughter.

I feel regret for not watching my daughter as she took her last breath.

I'm not sure which is worse. Some days the pain of both is equal, paralyzing me.

You probably don't understand what I'm saying at all, do you?

I don't mean to be condescending, sorry if you took it that way.

Until you lose a child, a child that needs you, depends on you, a child that is your world…until you lose that child, you'll never understand, I guess.

I was devastated following her death. Inconsolable.

When the doctors told me that there was nothing they could do, I wanted to tear their throats out. Instead, I called them liars.

When my husband broke down, I blamed him for her death.

He could have listened to me.

He could have fought for her.

He was a man. They would have listened to him.

When my mother tried to console me, I told her to go home. I didn't need her anymore. I needed her when my daughter was sick, I needed her to add her voice to mine, but she never did.

She didn't think I heard her, heard the words she'd say when she thought I wasn't paying attention. How I was a new mom, prone to hysterics, how I was just nervous, insecure…she never believed me either.

I don't remember Angelina's funeral.

I don't remember much following the months after her death. I was drugged a lot, between alcohol and the medication I'd been placed on, I lived in a haze, a fog.

Until the day of Angelina's birthday. It was like I woke up that day, fresh, alert, with a clear path of what I needed to do.

I stopped taking those damn mind-numbing pills.

That was the first step.

I was out running errands one day, and I ran into Chey, of all people.

We ended up going for coffee and had a nice chat. We talked about how angry I must be at the doctors and nurses, how wrong it was that they never listened to me, how horribly scarred our medical system is.

She asked me if I ever thought of doing something about it.

I'm sure she meant something political. Like join a group, take a stand, sue the doctor for malpractice or something.

I don't remember what I said, but I probably wished them all dead.

No, that's a lie. I do remember what I said.

I said I wanted a different ending. I said that it was not fair that they get to live their lives where my daughter never even got to experience hers. I said that if life is a story with pages waiting to be written, then I would choose a different ending for mine and for Angelina's.

That night, guess who showed up at my door?

Chey? No.

The Warden.

He was in the area, and Chey had asked him to drop off something for me.

She'd made me a nice care package, complete with bubble bath, candles, chocolate, and a few books.

In one of the books was a note. I still remember what it said:

Some endings are the best. Thought this was timely and might help with that ending you've been wishing was rewritten. Xoxo Chey

Innocent enough note, right?

Do you think a judge would think that?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BECCA TO JACK

Don't look at me like that, Jack.

The book was a thriller, about a man who lost his wife during surgery. He went a little crazy and killed the doctors and nurses involved in his wife's care. One by one they all died.

He was very inventive with his methods. Inventive enough that it sparked some ideas for me.

Now, how do you think that would have looked to a judge?

If he knew the Warden and his wife were somewhat culpable in all those deaths?

I mean…if it weren't for her giving me that book or with that note sparking the idea…

And if it weren't for him hand delivering it…

Maybe they'd all still be alive.

I'm just saying….

CHAPTER TWELVE

BECCA

It was close to the holidays.

My husband had left me by this time. He said he couldn't handle my anger and grief.

I didn't blame him. I was very angry, especially at him. I reminded him on a daily basis that our daughter was dead because of him.

Him and everyone else who didn't listen to me.

A mother always knows, and people should heed that.

A. Mother. Always. Knows.

I didn't do much when it came to decorating. I had my own little apartment, it was small but livable. I decided to do some baking. Christmas cookies, bars, and tarts, things everyone loves to nibble on over the holidays, right?

I bought a dozen or so small cookie tins and filled them with these treats I'd made.

I then put on a Santa hat and went to the doctor's office and hospital. It was important to me that the people who were supposed to notice something was wrong with my daughter but didn't, that they all got one of these tins.

I also made sure that I came close to closing so they'd take these home.

I didn't want them in the hospital when they ate them.

I also didn't care if they shared the items with family members.

Yes, the treats I'd made were laced with cyanide.

Yes, I meant for them to be poisonous.

Yes, I meant for each person to eat these treats and die.

It wasn't hard. It wasn't difficult and the papers were right when they said I showed no remorse for the deaths I'd caused.

Why would I? They killed my daughter by their inaction.

I hope to see them all in hell.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JACK

Lovely woman, don't you think?

Becca told me all about how she found the cyanide, even told me how much she added and what she did to hide the taste too.

You'd be crazy to think I was going to add that all in here though. I don't need you to get any ideas and then have someone figure out you read it from here.

And no, I will not be adding her recipe to this story either (I know someone will ask that).

I listened to the woman.

I watched her die.

I then called the Warden and told him what she'd said to me.

He asked me to burn any pages I'd written.

I told him to fuck off.

He probably won't like that I shared this confession with you.

Ask me if I care. Guaranteed the answer will be a huge HELL NO.

He knew I didn't want to listen to her confession. He made me anyway.

Fuck that bastard.

Yes, Warden - if you're reading this - fuck you.

Also, Merry Christmas (and thanks for that nice little holiday bonus, too. Always appreciate that.)

SONGS ON MY 'CHRISTMAS HATERS' PLAYLIST

As promised, here's the songs you can find on my playlist. I add to it here and there. Sometimes I'll search if others have created their own playlists and add them to mine.

You'll find some classics, not because of the song but because who's singing it.

Otherwise, these other songs…well, you'll need to listen to them to understand (I'd post them, but I don't want someone coming after me for copyright infringement or something).

JACK'S CHRISTMAS HATER SONG LIST:

- Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas - by Frank Sinatra and also the Sam Smith version (because his version is sad)
- No Presents for Christmas - by King Diamond
- St. Stephen's Day Murders by The Chieftans
- I Was Thinking I Could Clean Up for Christmas - by Aimee Mann
- The Fall - No Xmas for John Quay - by The Fall
- I Won't Be Home for Christmas - by Blink-182
- There Ain't No Sanity Clause - by The Damned
- Merry Christmas, Kiss my Ass! - by All Time Low
- The Season's Upon Us - by Dropkick Murphy's

- Christmas Will Be Just Another Day - by Brenda Lee
- Don’t Shoot Me Santa - by The Killers
- Christmas in Jail (Ain’t That A Pain) by Leroy Carr (a good oldie)
- Christmas in Hollywood - by Hollywood Undead
- Father Christmas - The Kinks
- Yule Shoot Your Eye Out - by Fall Out Boy
- The Little Boy that Santa Claus Forgot - Nat King Cole
- Christmas is Going to the Dogs - by Eels
- Kidnap the Sandy Claws - by Danny Elfman (because it’s just fun)
- It Doesn’t Often Snow at Christmas - by Pet Shop Boys
- Christmas With the Devil - Spinal Tap
- Fairytale of New York - by The Pogues
- Another Lonely Christmas - by Prince
- Thank God It’s Not Christmas - by Sparks
- Don’t Believe in Christmas - by Sonics
- Things I Want - by Tenacious D
- Daddy Drank Our Xmas Money - by TVTV$
- I Don’t Believe in Santa Clause - by The Vandals
- Christmas Wrapping - by The Waitresses
- Christmas Card From a Hooker in Minneapolis - by Tom Waits
- Christmas Day - by Jim White
- Christmas Was Better in the 80s - by The Futureheads
- All I Want for Christmas is to Kick Your Ass - by the Midnight Riders
- X-mas Eve - by Rancid
- The Christmas Song - by Weezer

Any you want to recommend? Let me know

MORE CONFESSION BOOKS?

Hell yes.

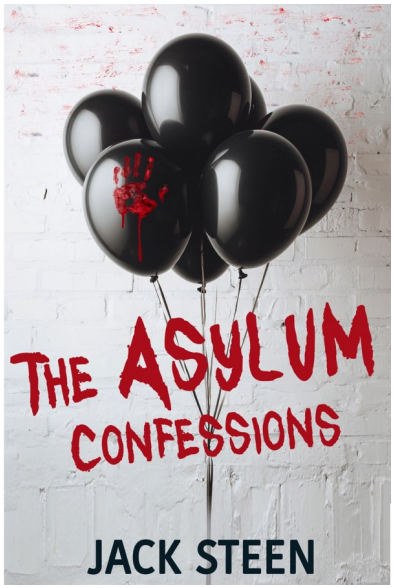
I've got notepads full of confessions.

If you want them, I'll make them available. The more you buy, the more beer I drink, so guess it's a win-win.

Head to my website and sign up - www.jacksteenbooks.com, click on the Newsletter link or better yet, join me on Patreon:

www.patreon.com/jacksteen

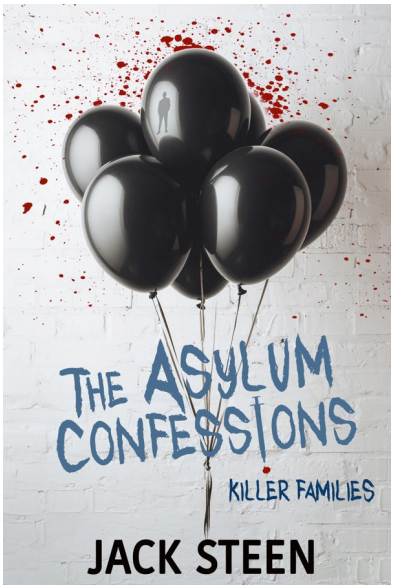
CONFESSION BOOK #1



The Asylum Confessions

The one that started it all! These are a few of my favorite confessions - if you haven't already read them, I hope you enjoy the journey!

CONFESSION BOOK #2

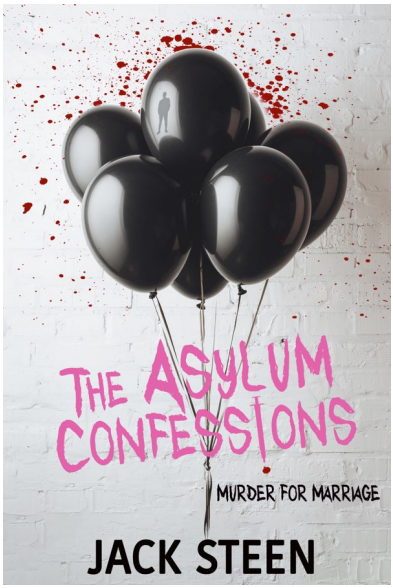


The Asylum Confessions: Book 2 - Killer Families

More confessions that deal with all things family related.

- One is a father who just wanted to protect his little girl.
- Then there's a pig farmer who never should have had children.
- One wants you to believe he's the brother of a mob boss.
- And then there's one would argue she should receive the Mother of the Year award.

CONFESSION BOOK #3

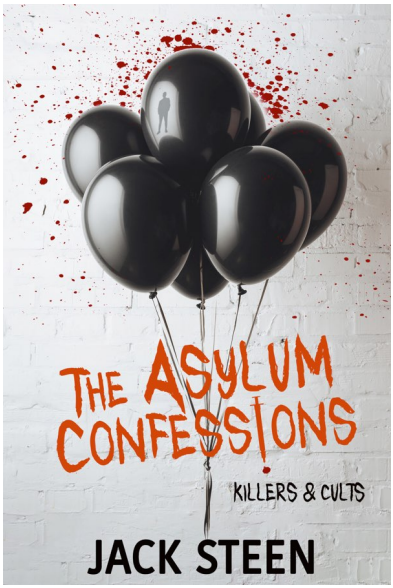


The Asylum Confessions: Book 3 - Murder for Marriage

The couples that kill together…well, they for sure don't stay together, right? These confessions deal with couples…

- One is a Preacher with a past.
- Another shouldn't be trusted.
- What's with farmers with buried secrets?
- And another who has a thing for soil and gardens.

CONFESSION BOOK #4

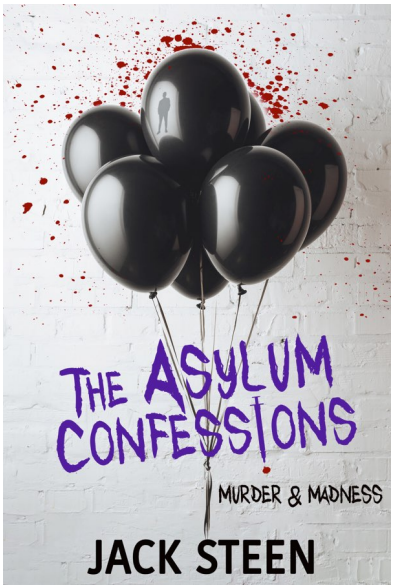


The Asylum Confessions: Book 4 - KILLERS & CULTS

Trust me on this…these confessions will take you on a wild ride:

- One thought she gave birth to the antichrist.
- Another was called the Candyman...any guess why?
- One grew up in a cult and believes he was the first of a 'pure' race.
- Then there's the guy who claims he was part of a secret test by the government and I've been waiting on his confession for a while!
- Finally, this one who loved Halloween and believed in all the rules. I sure you hope you didn't break any...

CONFESSION BOOK #5

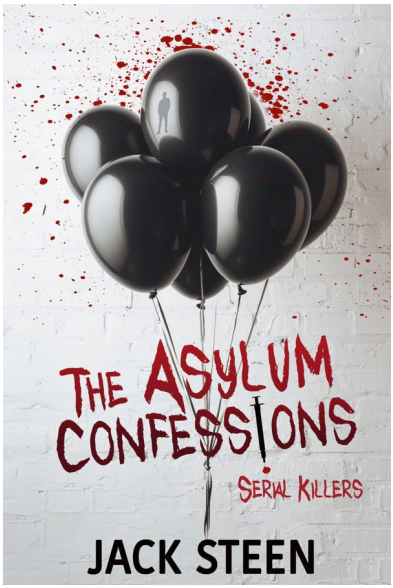


The Asylum Confessions: Book 5 - Murder & Madness

This book has confessions that remind me of the original Grimm brothers tales - you know, the good ones.

- Think Modern Day Sleeping Beauty – with a twist.
- One with a resemblance to Rapunzel that is kind of scary.
- One reminds me of Cinderella…with a thing for shoes.

CONFESSION BOOK #7



The Asylum Confessions: Book 7 - Serial Killers

This one is all about the serial killers…

Patient Karen – she's not quite the church-going woman you'd want baking cupcakes

Patient Clinton – is officially color-blind except, in rare cases, he sees one bloody color

Patient Cori – is a psychotic carny and proud of it

Patient Sister Rose - she's the ultimate Killer Sister